

Gender Parity in Opera in Canada

Opera.ca is the national association for opera in Canada representing 14 professional producing companies from coast to coast as well as affiliates, businesses and individuals. Opera.ca appreciates the opportunity to speak to this committee on the issue of Gender Parity and applauds this committee for studying this important issue. Gender Parity is an issue the opera sector takes as seriously as the government and we have enacted several initiatives to affect change in this areas, and that are aligned many of our recommendations.

Recommendation 1 - That Department of Canadian Heritage commission gender and diversity analysis research to better understand the scope and depth of the problem and to share the findings.

Collectively, the opera sector in Canada has not yet achieved gender parity among senior leaders and boards. Current parity figures for Artistic/General Director are at 43% or 6 women, and with the exception of one, they lead the smallest organizations. Gender parity on opera company boards in Canada is on average 46% or 90 out of 200 positions.

These figures are improvements in the past three years as the opera sector has undergone many recent leadership transitions which improved parity.

Three out of 8 senior leadership appointments in past 3 years have gone to women. We have also gathered data on parity in the sector that reaches beyond senior leadership and the board, to areas such as conductors and stage directors where there is much work to be done to achieve parity. Future research will include parity statistics in all leadership positions of an opera company to fully understand the depth of the problem.

Research is essential not only for understanding the problem but as a key step in establishing a baseline so we can measure improvements over time, and to establish explicit gender parity outcomes or expectations.

Recommendation 2 - **Work with NASOs and sector organizations in establishing realistic and achievable targets and timelines for achieving gender parity if adopting the Norway model of quotas.**

As a membership association representing the opera sector, we are focussed on change in gender parity and are in process of not only declaring change initiatives in parity, but in establishing targets and timelines for the sector that can be agreed upon by member companies. We are doing this because we understand the importance of having action plans, targets, and timelines behind declarations of change.

As a membership-based association, we focus on incentivizing change as we lack levers for mandating it but understand the Department of Canadian Heritage as a funder, might be considering a quota approach.

This recommendation requests that if a quota model is being considered that Department of Canadian Heritage work with sector organizations in establishing realistic and achievable targets.

Recommendation 3 - Provide funding for human resource programs that address perceived barriers to female leadership advancement, with a focus on mentorship and Second in Charge (2IC) positions.

The recent controversy over [top jobs in arts and culture in Canada going to non-Canadians](#) (in Globe and Mail) is exacerbated by the fact these appointments have mostly gone to non-Canadian men. One widespread rationale for this is the perception is that there is a lack of qualified Canadians for these senior positions, and by extension, a lack of qualified women.

Some hypothesize that the talent pool in Canada is too small, and others blame the lack of second in charge position. There is also evidence growing around gender bias with respect to what a leader looks like, [which is predominantly male. \(New York Times\)](#)

In her recent “Canadian Performing Arts Leadership Audit”, part of a final major research paper for her MBA studies, Consultant Jeanne Lesage notes that survey responses to “suggestions for the sector to select, develop and train next generation or leaders” include high scores for Mentoring and Second in charge positions.

Targeting both the perception of what a leader looks like, and lack of mentorship and second in charge positions, Opera.ca is developing women’s mentorship and job shadowing program matching female leaders in the field, and female proteges gaining experience at their side in a second in command capacity over the course of one year. Through this program, we also hope to reinforce and normalize the perception of women as leaders.

This is just one kind of investment in human resources that we think could generate meaningful change in gender parity.

Recommendation 4 - Partner with sectoral service organizations in providing services, professional development and support for Board governance training in subjects like gender bias, inclusive practices, and equity, diversity and accessibility training.

Despite our intentions and efforts, we recognize that Boards of Directors make hiring decisions, and that unconscious biases may exist in hiring practices. Boards themselves have also not achieved parity in the opera sector. To incentivize change and address implicit and unconscious bias in hiring practices, our organization is introducing a new Governance Series in Equity and Inclusion for Opera Board members. This series will focus on the concept of Corporate Responsibility or CR, a broadened definition of Corporate Governance to include accountability to a range of stakeholders including employees, volunteers, government and community. It will study how gender and diversity on boards contribute to greater CR.

The program is an example of how an investment in board training could help achieve gender parity. Such an investment could be combined with the recent announcement of investment in training in the creation of harassment-free work environments in arts and culture sector.