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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The first wave of single-gender institutions was founded during what’s considered the turn of the twentieth century, in the late 1800s and early 1900s during the “Civil War, Reconstruction and Progressive Eras” within US history. These institutions provided post-secondary educational opportunities for middle-class white women, boarding residence for working-class women leaving rural areas and moving to large cities, and social-emotional development and well-being for women and girls. These institutions included:

- Young Women’s Christian Association;
- The Seven Sisters, a consortium of liberal arts colleges for women;
- Girl Scouts of America; and
- American Association of University Women.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of organizations for all women within the US at that time, but provides an important framework for the emergence of such organizations. An important note is that all of these institutions were founded before the ratification of the 19th Amendment, prohibiting the federal government from denying white women the right to vote based on sex. Additionally, these institutions emerged during and immediately after the abolition of slavery within the US.

Gendered Organizations

The 33 currently active historically women’s colleges and universities, down from their peak of more than 281 in the 1960s, must constantly wrestle with complex and shifting perspectives on economic, philosophical, social, political, and cultural realities in relation to their existence. Even as historically single-gender educational institutions struggle to adopt admission policies which meet changing social, political, and cultural standards, these institutions report having gender-diverse and inclusive Board of Trustees leadership. Within the past 20 years, some gender justice organizations have expanded their philosophical approach to achieving social responsiveness based on evolving perspectives of the benefits of incorporating gender-diverse approaches to empowering women and girls. This history is provided as a reminder of the radical approach adopted in founding the YWCA at a historical time when women’s social location within the US was characterized by limited and narrowly defined roles.
Today, YWCAs nationwide serve over 2.3 million women, girls, and their families. YWCA USA’s strategic framework is the culmination of consultation and exploration with YWCAs across the country and reflects the institution’s legacy as a pioneering organization that squarely confronts social justice issues to make lasting, meaningful change. The focus areas that guide the YWCA’s collective efforts at the national and local levels are racial justice and civil rights, empowerment and economic advancement, and health and safety.

Through the work of its Gender-Neutral Task Force, the YWCA USA recently began working with Morten Group, LLC (a national consulting firm based in Chicago) to research the landscape of contemporary gendered organizations with similar missions, and conduct individual interviews with executive leaders of YWCA Association members around the country that have petitioned the national organization for an exception to the policy. As part of its policy assessment, the YWCA is interested in the decision-making and implementation process informing the organizational change.

Data Methodology

Morten Group conducted 9 individual interviews and facilitated 1 group conversation with another national organization belonging to the Gender-Neutral Task Force. Of the 9 interviews, 8 were internal (with leaders of YWCA organizations that petitioned for an exception to the single-gender policy) and 1 was external. This external interview and the group conversation were conducted to make use of data from similar national organizations with missions focused on women and girls that have made the decision to expand leadership or program access to individuals identifying as men. The two external organizations included in the data collection are The Campaign School at Yale University and Ms. Foundation for Women. These interviews and conversations, both internal and external, provided an opportunity to understand and build on the successful methods used to navigate through such important philosophical, leadership, and organizational changes.

Interview Protocol

The interview areas of exploration were comprised of an interview protocol based on question items designed to explore the following areas: 1) Introduction and description of how the YWCA’s mission is implemented into the organization; 2) Rationale for requesting an exception to and changing its single-gender organizational policy or practices; 3) Internal and external inputs to the organizational change process; 4) Board of Directors composition; 5) Board recruitment and engagement strategies; 6) Implementation approaches; 7) Benefits and challenges to adopting and optimizing a gender-inclusive Board or leadership structure; and 8) Task force advice and recommendations.
Data Analysis

Participants were recruited using targeted sampling. Eight of the nine interviews conducted were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exception of one participant who was uncomfortable being recorded. Thematic analysis was used for analyzing data to enhance understanding of factors that influenced organizational policy changes and implementation strategies. Because there are such robust qualitative data, all of the responses could not be reflected in the report. The themes and quotes included in this document were selected based on the following criteria: 1) Participant replication of more than 40%; and 2) Themes that emerged which were important to the mission alignment of YWCA USA.

Introduction

Because the interviews were specifically conducted to collect the rationale, methods, and outcomes of participants’ experiences, this report will provide longer direct quotations than are often found in similar documents. This is done as a way to retain primary thoughts, reflections, and comments. While short summaries for each section are provided as an introduction to each section of quotes, the words of the executive leaders are not paraphrased. Comments are edited for length, thematic inclusion and amplification of the data descriptions. Although a targeted sample, the executive leaders’ responses have been de-identified as much as possible; individuals are referred to as “executive leadership” or “leaders” within the report.

Summary of Findings

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Duration of executive leadership among leaders of YWCA Associations ranged from 2-7 years. Although not queried for race and ethnicity, all individual executive leaders interviewed identified as women.

REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

The executive leaders who participated in interviews represented the East, West, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, Midwest, and New England regions of the United States.

MISSION IMPLEMENTATION

The interview participants all provided a diverse, well-aligned, unique, and expansive range of approaches to the implementation of the YWCA’s mission within their respective agencies and geographic locations. The applied
approaches reflect a commitment to thoughtful and integrated approaches which advance the empowerment of women and girls. The theme of equity was articulated as a priority by the executive leaders and demonstrated within their organizational programs and initiatives, partnerships, and strategic focus.

**RATIONALE FOR POLICY CHANGE**

All of the leaders indicated the following considerations when their organizations petitioned for an exception to the single-gender policy: 1) Expanded economic opportunities; 2) Intentionally engaging men as allies in the advancement of equity for and empowerment of women of girls; 3) Philosophical divergence from YWCA USA’s single-gender policy; and 4) A belief that men should share in the social change needed to improve the lives of women and girls. For the external organization participants, the policy change was influenced by similar factors, including 1) An expanding definition of gender and moving beyond the gender binary to support better alignment with constituents and key stakeholders and 2) Philosophical beliefs about changing perspectives on the rapidly evolving realities and definitions of equity and inclusion.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE PROCESS**

All participants reported that listening and incorporating constituent feedback into the organizational change process was a key mechanism of informing their deliberations and planning about adoption of this inclusion model. It’s important to distinguish that for all of the organizations, while the model for advancing the agency’s mission was expanded to include more allies and supporters — specifically, those who identify as men — the core mission was unchanged. For example, The Campaign School at Yale University both changed its name and expanded its admission criteria to include gender identity and gender non-conforming individuals. The mission, however, remained unchanged in its focus on non-partisan development of women candidates interested in seeking political office at all levels of government.

**BOARD COMPOSITION**

Seventy-five percent of the leadership interviewed expressed having come to the organization with a gender-inclusive Board already in existence. A combined 25% of the leadership interviewed expressed that they were leading the process of considering a gender-inclusive Board, or were moving forward with operationalizing gender-inclusive polices which were already in place but not yet implemented. With regard to Board leadership, all of the organizations held officer positions for individuals identifying as women only, and still others created provisions within their by-laws that held an overall percentage majority for women.
BOARD RECRUITMENT

While a predominant number of organizations interviewed currently have a gender-inclusive Board, a small number expressed moving towards creating this process and all expressed both similar and distinct pathways to diversifying their Board composition. Most of the organizations expressed having male leadership on other internal organizational committees (specifically fundraising); this made it easier to select from and in some cases also more difficult to respond to questions related to the lack of Board placement because of existing leadership roles held. For the higher education institution interviewed, changing the name and expanding the definition of women took approximately 18 months of discussion before a decision could be made. Once the decision was made in November 2019, a number of other cascading implementation changes were also needed to prepare for student admission by January 2020.

The length of time that the organizations have operated with gender-inclusive Board composition ranged from 0-20 years and greater for both internal and external organizations. One notable pathway to creating gender-inclusive Boards involved making use of internal opportunities to identify and recruit potential Board members from existing committees with male leadership. Other leaders expressed utilizing recruitment methods focused on acquiring specific expertise and skills needed at the Board level. There was a consistent theme among executive leaders of being careful to not ‘tokenize’ the men recruited for the Board. What was instead represented was the very thoughtful but rigorous vetting process for all Board members, assignment of mentors in some cases, and adopting cohort models which also included male members.

Executive leaders mentioned clear characteristics or behaviors which were seen as incompatible with Board placement. Interview participants often identified these characteristics during on-boarding, after selection, or while managing inherited male Board members. These included: a) Having an inability to understand and empathize with participant experiences; b) Displaying a discomfort with promoting the mission; or c) Sharing public opinions which were inconsistent with the racial and social justice focus expected of Board leadership.

BOARD ENGAGEMENT

All of the executive leadership acknowledged the many nuanced and important considerations and audiences to be attended to in adopting more gender-inclusive policies. Managing the existing leadership and anticipated fears of culture change, gendered power dynamics, and loss of organizational identity and roots were among the greatest concerns. Overwhelmingly, the leadership expressed less cultural change, but expanding a range of views regarding conceptualizing and planning on behalf of the organization.
IMPLEMENTATION APPROACHES

With regard to staff, consumers, and other key stakeholders, leaders expressed less concern and in fact reported the opposite. Leaders discussed the importance of being intentional about selection and having an overall gender-inclusive approach to committee composition to provide cross-learning for all Board members. Leaders reported largely positive feedback about the presence of men being seen as advocates and utilizing their circles of influence and resources to educate and create greater allies in support of women and girls.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFIT OF A GENDER-INCLUSIVE BOARD

All of the leaders interviewed expressed the benefits of moving to or considering a gender-inclusive Board. While there was a range of organizational benefits experienced across a variety of areas, the most tangible benefits articulated were 1) Economic gain and 2) Increased alignment between a mission focused on equity and engaging men as allies towards this advancement.
Implementation of YWCA Mission

When asked about the ways in which the organization incorporates the mission into its operations, the leaders interviewed provided a range of organizational strategic approaches and programs to demonstrate mission alignment with YWCA USA. The predominant programs mentioned were anti-violence programs — specifically, those focused on intimate partner violence, trafficking, and exploitation. These programs included a range of services for survivors and families, including shelter, behavioral health, and court support. Other programs less represented among the interview participants focused on aggressors of violence as well.

Other innovative programs and services discussed included: shelters specifically for LGBTQ individuals; programs for currently incarcerated women and men to support family stabilization; programs focused on immigrants and refugees; and advocacy for equal access to mental health services. Wraparound services including legal advocacy and financial literacy were also identified as key resources for empowering women and their families. Recently, keeping in alignment with the mission to eradicate racism, organizations are engaging in strategies focused on identifying institutional and structural forms of racism to guide programs that envision equity for individuals, families, and communities. The following themes reflect the commitment of the organizations in guiding their work:

“The balance of the mission, of course, is promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity. I think that all of those are looped very clearly into the work that we are doing within our programs. And what does independence mean for our clients to be able to live free from abuse and control, and how do they really live autonomously and in a way that they’ve decided.”

“I think we’re doing the best job – eliminating racism is something that is – we use an equity lens – in everything that we do, from the Board down to our front-line staff, from policies to budget to recruitment strategies. And when I say we use it, I mean, I don’t think we’ll ever be done in proving how it works in this area. But it is front and center in every conversation. We have an all-staff today. Every single all-staff has been through an equity engagement exercise. Every single Board meeting has an equity engagement conversation, piece of reading, or exercise. So the anti-racism work is active.”
“It’s clear we walk the talk, as we have pretty high scores relative to our employee experience. For us, organizationally, we are very much focused on creating an inclusive workspace, just like we have focused on creating an inclusive marketplace for the work that we do.”

Although different approaches have been adopted for this important work, all of the organizations are aligned around the ways in which women and families are best supported to create personal, community, and structural change.

Exceptions to the Single-Gender Policy & Organizational Change

When participants were asked about the factors that led to organizational decision(s) to petition for an exception to the single-gender policy, there were four primary reasons provided across all of the leadership: 1) Expanded economic opportunities; 2) Engaging men as allies in the advancement of equity and empowerment of women and girls; and 3) Philosophical divergence from YWCA USA’s single-gender policy; and 4) A belief that men should share in the social change needed to improve the lives of women and girls.

For the external organization represented in the interview process, the executive leadership reported that the organizational change was influenced by similar philosophical changes related to the inclusion of gender non-binary individuals for admission to their program, to expand the support systems of the women enrolled in their programs, and to remain relevant in the work.

Seventy-five percent of the executive leadership interviewed reported that they inherited Boards which were already gender-inclusive at the time of their appointment as CEO. Fifteen percent of the leadership led their organizations in the effort to petition for the exception to policy, while 10% percent indicated that their organization had already petitioned and were granted the exception to policy but had not worked on implementation strategies. Leadership expressed their decision to change or implement the policy through the following quotes:

“Candidly, it probably started with my own issue around not having representation from all interested parties. And I felt that we had been touting for a long time that domestic violence and sexual assault are not women’s issues; they’re human issues. But then we turned around and said an entire segment of the population could not be on our Board. A couple of things with that: (1) I think that men can be just as interested, passionate, affected by domestic violence and sexual assault as their female counterparts. But the other piece of this was (2) when we
are looking at Board composition, I’m not really looking at it male / female / orientation / ethnicity. I’m looking at it as our Board should be representative of the population served.”

“There were several reasons. The lead reason was, obviously, economic. Economic programmatically, and economic in running the business, because nonprofits are a business. We’re in the business of people, but we’re a business.”

“The conversation around gender and the conversation around gender fluidity, the conversation around what it means to be a woman, what it means to be male, the conversation around the equity lens with that and doing it by ourselves felt very myopic, not just to our organization, but to the organizations that we do business with.”

“I wasn’t here – it’s been a lot of years for our YW – it precedes me. But my understanding was that women’s rights are not just a women’s issue. And the way I continue to support that is that until we are all on board – it’s just like saying that racism is a people of color issue. Um, no. It’s white folks who need to get their act together on that. And I feel the same way about feminism, that it’s about empowerment. By alienating men and keeping them out, that doesn’t call them in alongside, where they need to be to be on the line.”

“We wanted to include men on our Board for a number of reasons. It’s the equitable thing to do. We serve men in all of our programs because we serve victims of domestic violence regardless of gender or gender identity. So to have an all-female Board went against what was expected of us in our community and was seen by some funders as discriminating, which we didn’t want to be seen as with our mission. And also, we really believe – I really believe strongly – that basically, women are gatherers and men are hunters, we needed some hunters on our Board. So we could sit around and talk about making decisions forever to where we have every fact available and maybe actually never move forward, which is what the YWCA did for years.”

The external organizations represented in both the individual interview and group conversation also shared the reasons for their policy changes and optimization of their gender-inclusive Board policy, as illustrated by the following supportive quotes:

“We are considered a legacy institution and that means folks have a very clear image of what they are expecting when they get the Ms. Foundation. Our job is to build up women’s collective power in the United States and to
ensure equity and justice for all. We lift up voices of women and girls in the United States working at the grassroots.”

“We were working with organizations and non-binary individuals. Gay men were running many campaigns for women. They thought it would especially helpful for non-binary [individuals] and gay men to attend our one-day trainings. We have had men on our board, some of our men are donors.”

Broader Ecosystem Considerations

When thinking about broader considerations of policy, consumers, and representation, some leaders expressed what they felt was a responsibility to include men in leadership for the following reasons:

“You know you can’t solve problems that weren’t created by you, by yourself. And we truly believed that we needed the voice of those who were contributing to the issue at the table, and we needed men as allies at that conversation, and not to mention the women that we were serving had men and boys in their homes that they were living with and taking care of, and we needed their voice at the table. Their children were in our programs and in our preschool. We didn’t only serve little girls, and we don’t only serve teenage girls, either. We serve all kids.”

“So if I’m looking for an attorney, if I’m looking for somebody who works for the Department of Social Services, if I’m looking at an accounting person with – or in this case we were looking at land development – I don’t really focus on, is it a man or is it a woman, I’m like, ‘Who is the best person in the County? Who is the most knowledgeable, that is going to advance the work of the organization?’ And I felt like that was getting in the way.”
Philanthropic Influence

All of the participants acknowledged the role of philanthropy, particularly United Way being a significant funder for some of the organizations, in shaping their decision to move towards a more inclusive Board. Participants reflected on this in the following ways:

“Every time I would say to a United Way or a potential donor or funder, ‘We only have women on our Board,’ they kind of went, ‘What do you mean, you only have women on your Board? What?’ It was kind of an expectation that we had changed with the times.”

“I had an individual who had a family foundation – it was a man – and he had been consistently giving to the organization in the range of $10,000 to $15,000 a year. But he told me point-blank – he was very nice about it – but he said, ‘You know, I give more to the organizations where I actually sit on the Board.’ And he wasn’t offended; I think he thought it didn’t make a whole lot of sense. But I think at that point when you say, ‘I can’t necessarily get the best of …’ or ‘Here’s an individual who grew up in a home where either they were affected by intimate partner violence or their parent was …’ or whatever, and they can’t sit on the Board but they can be a volunteer, or it’s impeding the financial piece… I can’t think of a single reason why it makes sense that you wouldn’t have a neutral Board.”

“Just making sure that our funders were comfortable with what some of them felt was discrimination. I’ve had a couple of people say, ‘How come you guys haven’t gotten sued for that yet?’ I’m like, ‘Um, I don’t know, but I’m not going to put that out in the atmosphere. Let’s leave that alone!’ They’re kind of like, ‘You know, if it were the opposite, and it was only men on your Board, would that fly?’ And I’m like, ‘No, it wouldn’t.’ So I’ve gotten into some of those conversations. And then we had partners who didn’t necessarily say, ‘I’m not going to fund you,’ but I could tell that they were uncomfortable with the fact that we didn’t have an inclusive Board.”

While weighing the important philosophical, economic, and practical considerations given to the decision and its potential implications, each leader expressed their attempt throughout to balance organizational need and philosophical alignment.
Organizational Change Process

The mechanisms used by each organization for gathering both internal and external input were as diverse as their Boards. Approaches ranged from targeted discussions at the Board level to focus groups and consumer and funder conversations. In some cases, routine as well as specific communications were employed to announce these changes (i.e., increased access to specific funding opportunities, press releases).

Because more than 75% of the leaders inherited gender-inclusive Boards, living out the commitment was more of a process of discussion of the board matrix of needs connected to recruitment strategies. The quotes below reflect some of the thinking and planning approaches utilized to support organizational advancement within this area:

“I was in the middle of a strategic planning process at the same time, so this was a part of my strategic planning process. During that time, when I was collecting feedback from the community, from stakeholders, from the Board during our workshops, from the employees, this was one of the points which we discussed. And the overwhelming response was, ‘It’s about time.’ There was no one, no one, who felt like it wasn’t timely. And we were entering our Centennial, so it was the perfect time to be able to pivot. And most people were actually surprised when I asked the question, because they already thought we had men on our Board.”

“We held a series of listening sessions, where we invited community leaders from our community to come in and talk to us about the role of the YWCA in the race of social equity – the D-I-E work, Diversity, Inclusion, Equity – and what our role should be, and how we could participate with them, and how we could become engaged with them. And that has been very, very fruitful for us.”

“I think they are far more open to the concept of gender as a non-binary, fluid social construct or concept, and that we need to be open to change in this regard in a way they hadn’t been previously.”

“The conversation continued – and I’m only laughing because we had gotten so much unsolicited feedback about the fact that we didn’t have men on our Board, and why that is. There was a lot of communication. There was then follow-up. So people who had been donors, people who had been on committees, because we’ve always had men on committees, just not on the Board, we took time to follow up with committee members. And basically we said, ‘What is your thought on this? Has this changed your perspective of the agency?’ A lot of that just reaffirmed what they had already (unsolicited) said to us, which is, ‘Interesting that I can sit on your
committee. Interesting that you’ll come to me for a sponsorship for an event, but I can’t be on the actual Board.’ Again, I give a lot of credit – people weren’t nasty about it. But at the same time… I had people who flat-out said that it seems really shortsighted.”

“The staff is supportive. The feedback from the Board was, ‘So long as we don’t change why we do what we do, and we don’t deviate from the fact that we’re here to eliminate racism and empower women, let’s open the doors wide to figure out everyone who can help us to do that.’ And that was what was more important to them.”

The philosophical rationale for changing or advancing the organizations’ gender-inclusive processes was guided by inputs from key internal stakeholders to support leaders’ decisions. These decisions are reflected in the following quotes:

“To make sure the board is really collaborative and thoughtful, and really make sure that everyone’s opinions and voice is shared respectfully. The president of the Board did a magnificent job so that every Board member was able to speak, and then we discussed and as a result there was greater buy-in, so everyone was speaking with one voice.”

“Response has been overwhelmingly positive, and so we were very pleased. A handful of grads didn’t read or understand the public notice and didn’t understand the term ‘non-binary.’ After we had conversations, people felt more comfortable.”

For those organizations moving through policy change to selection and on-boarding, the necessary process often expanded conversations with key stakeholders (in some cases, not all). In all cases, however, the process had to be intentional, thoughtful, and focused on broader organizational needs, according to the leaders interviewed.

**Board Composition**

Board composition of the organizations surveyed varied in size from 11-54 members. Participating leaders indicated a range of Board diversity with regard to geographic location and urban versus rural areas. When thinking about broader diversity, all YWCA Association members expressed utilizing a Board matrix to identify needs and gaps broader than gender, including gender identity, sexual orientation, age, race and ethnicity, community involvement, and resource-leveraging opportunities, as well as specific skills and expertise.
A small percentage of the organizations expressed having an informal process for deciding on the number of appointments, while others indicated having explicit language about percentages and a supermajority. Overwhelmingly, the leadership represented within the interviews had, at minimum, undertaken informal considerations and practices related to officer positions (with the exception of two organizations, where men currently hold officer roles). Some of the organizational policies and practices that have guided these decisions are reflected within the following statements:

“When I first started, we had zero. I got us to three, which were representative of about five percent at that time, so ten percent is on the higher side for us. Our goal, my goal, is to have us at thirty percent. I need to set a timing on that. But at a minimum, we want at least one male in each of our Board slates, and we have been able to do that for each year.”

“I would tell you, for us, this was not a challenging decision for our Board. And at the time, we had maybe twenty people on the Board. And there was not a single person in the room – there was good conversation about why it had, what does it potentially imply, why would we not. But this wasn’t something that needed to be debated over the course of a year. This probably took maybe three Board meetings.”

“One Board member was a little worried about male leadership on the Board; there’s still a little bit of contention as to whether a man should be Board Chair, and I don’t think we’ve actually solved that yet. Our bylaws doesn’t speak to that, but we have a supermajority in our bylaws. One Board member felt like she didn’t want the voice of women and that fabric of how women work together to be deteriorated in the Board meetings or in committees. And I kind of put that back on them, and I said, ‘Well, first of all, we are going to keep the culture that we want on our Board. Second of all, we’re going to be very deliberate about which men, because it’s not all men that belong on the Board of a YWCA. And third, exactly what kind of communication would we be deteriorating? What is that, and why would our relationship change?’ So far, so good. We’re okay.”

One organization reflected having 10% of the Board as male; another organization with a board comprised of 30% men shared additional priorities and considerations:

“I would say we have 34 Board members. When I inherited the organization, it was about 80% white and 70% female. We are one of the few YWCAs that has men on our Board. The male ratio has stayed the same and the female ratio has stayed the same, but as far as diversity is concerned, we have increased African American
representation by 30% and we have American Indian representation, we have Indian representation, we have Latino representation.”

Another organization reflected that while they do not currently have men on the board, they have recently begun to incorporate men into other areas of leadership, as reflected in the following statement:

“We started a walk against domestic violence last fall, and we had three men and three women co-chairing that event. That’s the first time we’ve really had men, and it was very successful. They brought their networks and they brought their resources, and that’s been terrific. We have had a Men Against Domestic Violence initiative, a small fundraising initiative, and we collect their names and then we take out a full-page ad on Fathers’ Day. We have various leaders whose pictures are there, and then hundreds of names of other men in the community who are standing against domestic violence. I think we are moving in the direction of strong allyship with the men in our community. We believe that it’s critical. We’re always fighting at the domestic violence provider against this notion of women as victims, because they’re susceptible to that, and pushing back and refocusing folks on the fact that aggressors are committing violence, and that’s where we need to focus a lot of our prevention work. Not just strengthening the personal assets of an agency of women; it’s working with aggressors and preventing that abuse.”

Still other leaders reflected on decision-making regarding gender-inclusive Board leadership in the following ways:

“We only have one male on a Board of ten, right now. And plan to keep a super majority. I believe we actually went with a 75/25 split – we will always have 75% women. We actually just welcomed our first man on the Board in January. So even though we had the permission to do it, we waited – it’s been a laborious process. We didn’t just say, ‘Hey, door’s open. Come on in!’ We interviewed and went through about a four-month process to select him. And we’ve shortlisted two others, and we’re waiting, because we also want to make sure that, of the two or three men that we bring on board, that there is diversity among them.”

“We average about a 25-member Board, and I would say that we’ve never had more than six. At the current time, we have not offered that. Our Executive Committee has always been all women. We’ve stayed pretty much the same. When we started, we added four men, because we didn’t want to ‘tokenize’ anybody, and at any one time we’ve had between four and six male Board members. All four of the ones who served their first term with us, all
wanted to serve a second term, so that was six years that they were on our Board. They’ve all term-limited off, and I miss some of them terribly.”

“We have one man on our Board. Technically speaking, yes we do. We have thirteen members. My guess is that with our next Board, we’ll probably bring on two more. As is the case with all of our Board members, you have to sit on a committee for a minimum of a year before you come onto our Board. The two folks that we are looking at currently have been on a committee for three years at this point. And I think that’s important regardless. I think people…non-profits are quirky things. And either the quirkiness works for you or it doesn’t. So I think it’s important that folks know who the YW is and that it works.”

“When I got to Ms., there had been quite a bit of conversation, not necessarily about gender, but about what inclusion looked like. I wanted to show the Board and many supporters of the Ms. Foundation that we were looking to do something different. So, right off the bat I recognized Janet Mock at one of our annual galas in order to push the conversation and it was the first time that a national organization had recognized a trans woman of color. The Foundation had that policy since the beginning for men, where they sat in leadership was very different than where they were able to sit on the board.”

Gender Inclusivity and Officer Roles

Two of the nine organizations represented have men in officer positions, and shared their processes in the following ways:

“We also don’t have anything that says a male could not be Board President. We’re pretty universal…it’s just one more delineation of ‘you can do almost everything but not this.’ And we didn’t want to start breaking it down like, ‘Okay. Now you can be on the Board, but you can’t be President.’ Again, I think you select the individual in your community with the greatest level of expertise for where your organization is trying to go strategically at that moment in time, in the same way that you bring your Board members on at specific times based on what your agency is trying to do.”

“We do have men on our Executive Committee. Currently, our Treasurer is a male. And our Secretary is a male, also. Generally, the path is Secretary, to Incoming President, to Board President. We had talked with him about his thoughts about whether or not he would be interested. He is an African American leader that had been very interested and invested in our mission. He just brings so much, as a person, he brings so much energy to the
Board, and he’s a ton a fun to have around. He’s really insightful. So he’s a really great leader on our Board. The last two presidents that we’ve had have been a little more serious, so we’re trying to make sure that we’re also keeping personality diversity on our Executive Committee.”

“It’s interesting. We have men in officer roles. Our Board Secretary is a man. We have our committee chairs. So we have one officer that’s a man, but then on our Executive Committee, we have two men, because one of our committee chairs is also a man.”

All of the organizations represent different points in the process. It is clear that intentional, rigorous consideration is given to how each organization advances equity and inclusivity overall, not merely that they meet a quantitative metric as an indication of accomplishment.

Community Representation

An additional Board diversity consideration that arose in conversation was the importance of having Board representation that also reflects the communities in which each organization is situated and/or the population served. This theme is reflected in some of the following quotes:

“People sometimes make the mistake of saying your Board should be representative of the community, but that’s not actually accurate in my opinion. I think it should be representative of the population served. So continuing to work on that and look at your Board matrix, and say expertise and age, ethnicity, orientation, etc. is relevant to making sure that we’re representative of the voices of the people we’re serving.”

“Our charter talks about diversity, equity in every sense of the word, which included men and women and transgender [individuals], and race and ethnicity. We include all of that in our definition of race and social justice. It’s not just about the color of your skin; it’s about your gender, how you identify yourself, your religion, communities that you represent. It’s all across the Board.”

Although not articulated in the same way by all participants, the theme of greater and relevant representation through the organizational structure— particularly at the leadership level — was consistent.
Recruitment and Engagement Strategies

Organizations described fairly consistent approaches to their overall board recruitment strategies. The predominant approach included intentional recruitment to fill gaps in knowledge, skill, expertise, or competency, often identified and guided by a Board matrix. Additional characteristics and vetting processes were also associated with personal characteristics, historical leadership within the organization, and community representation. Once new members were on-boarded, some organizations described practices of buddy assignment, targeted conversations, and Board retreats as a way of fully integrating all new Board members.

A predominant theme among many of the leaders was an explicit articulation of their overall Board recruitment approaches, which tended to be more focused on overall expertise and organizational need and less on gender. When thinking about the Board matrix approach to selection, participants offered the following comments regarding their recruitment processes:

“We look at all of those, actually. We have a very deliberate Board recruiting process that looks at industry, function, skillset, diversity of course. We look at gender, ethnicity, primarily for the diversity element. But then we also look at age. And then we look for industry representation and functional area representation, and skills or expertise. And then sort of tertiary, we look at social influence and things like that, and because of our ability to achieve our give-get.”

“I don’t know if I have the very best onboarding process for male Board members that’s different from female Board members. We have an onboarding process that includes – first of all, the vetting process is pretty long. The vetting process includes a tour, it includes a full presentation of the organization, it includes a job description, it includes interviews with the Board. So, when they get on board, they’ve gone through all of that.”

“I think we’re just intentional about it. In the onboarding process, everyone gets a mentor that they have on the Board that will work with them throughout the year to answer their questions and to work with them on understanding the organization. We have a very, very thorough onboarding program that includes more than most organizations do, touring the facilities, meeting with Board members, viewing sites, and being really grounded in the program work that we do.”
For those organizations integrating men onto the Board for the first time or considering doing so, those leaders offered the following reflections on their processes:

“What I will say we do differently for this particular Board member – this male – is that we made sure that all of our Executive Leadership – four women on the Board – met with him together, so that they wanted to be sure that he understood the gravity of the responsibility that he was taking on – becoming the first male, first of all, in history, on our Board. And they wanted to make sure, most importantly, that he understood the gravity, that it was as important to him, that he was that person, and that he took the responsibility very seriously. So they were very, very intentional about ‘Which man, and does he really get it?’”

“We were very specific about it. We were very strategic about it. We defined what men in the community did we think could really contribute to our mission and our Board, and then we asked to meet with them. I asked to meet with them one-on-one and shared that we were adding men to our Board and wanted them to be the founding group of men. At least one of them I had to do a little bit more convincing than that, but most of them were just really, really honored. Adding men to the Board gives more opportunity to have a diverse Board, because when it’s just women, you’re excluding a whole lot of people in your community from that.”

“Yes. I think the biggest thing for us is just making sure that from the get-go we are very clear about our commitments to our mission and our vision and how we are going to talk about ourselves and how we want our Board to talk about us, making sure that there’s – I mean, I will tell you that there was a man last year who had been on our overall committee, for a Central Board member, and after we met with him, we were like, ‘No. Nope.’ He could maybe be on the committee somewhere to provide advice somehow, but no, he’s not the right fit for a Board member. You could tell – there were periods where he just felt uncomfortable. The subject matter – we didn’t feel like he could engage fully in the topic, and things like that.”

It is important to note that the wherever the leaders found themselves on the journey towards thinking about and implementing these changes, the greatest thread throughout was ensuring that the processes were representative, transparent, and as inclusive as possible.
Implementation Successes and Challenges

Leadership expressed specific ways in which they planned for onboarding and new member integration. Most leader responses were not gender-specific and in fact were more focused on larger integration issues and approaches:

“And we here at the YWCA, if we’re going to serve all genders and gender identities but we still have male and female bathrooms, like most places, that is crazy. And so we immediately changed all of our bathrooms to gender-inclusive bathrooms, not gender-neutral bathrooms, because I have a problem with that term too. Who wants to be neutral? So I call them gender-inclusive bathrooms. In fact, our bathrooms just say All Genders. It’s very easy. After we made that move, and I wrote a blog about male and female bathrooms being the way of the dinosaur, like what is wrong with us as a nation to still think of these two genders.”

“I would say that the feedback we are getting from our key stakeholders is believed to be more courageous about empowering women, and that the YWCA needs to be seen more as a race and social justice organization and be more vocal about it. Because most people see us as the old antique organization that’s been around forever, a bunch of rich women helping women, quite frankly, and that’s not at all what’s happening here in this community. But I think it’s still pervasive nationally in some sectors, and we’re trying to break that down and really be intentional about, ‘No, we’re not!’”

“That, I would say, is the most important in this space. With women, yes, you still want to make sure that your Board members align, but being that there is an obvious gender ‘elephant in the room,’ you have to make sure that all of the core issues and values of the organization align with this person, or else you will really, really very quickly go off the deep end. And if not, I would also say that you need to make sure that the women on your Board, or the Board that is bringing men on board, is ready to be the guard at the gate for those things…. So if it starts to go – they’re trained and they’re prepared, and they have consensus around how things will be handled if a male Board member is going off the rails – that they understand if they’re not aligned, how to act and how to act quickly, and that way avoid those kind of things as quickly as they can and understand the opportunity to do so through their Bylaws.”

“What I think is the one thing – for us, it wasn’t an issue, but it’s the one thing that I get asked. If somebody calls me about this, they always ask the same question, and it’s the question about, ‘Can a man be president?’ And I think for some organizations, that’s going to be a major sticking point. And I think that folks are going to need to
think that all the way through. For us, it wasn’t an issue. I think for some, especially the more grassroots you are, I think it’s going to be an increasingly sticky topic. I could be wrong, but I think it’s going to be a sticky topic.”

Gender Power Dynamics and Board Culture Changes

Only one out of nine executive leaders indicated there were gendered power dynamics observed, with 90% of participants reporting having no procedural or negative cultural Board changes. Leaders attributed this to: a) Thorough vetting and on-boarding processes; b) The presence of strong women Board members; and c) The promotion of Board cultures focused on transparency in acknowledging and confronting challenges. The following quotes support some of the experiences reported:

“Of course. And we call each other out on it. It doesn’t happen very often anymore because of the trainings we’ve been through, but I think they would say the whole experience of being on the Board has been an equity journey for them. For example – and he’s not on the Board anymore, and he was a super-expert white guy, but he used to take up a lot of airspace. So I just talked to him afterwards and said, ‘You’re being a white boy! Try to look around and measure your participation. Is it really necessary?’”

“I think the only other thing that’s just like being conscientious – making sure that no one’s voice drowns out another. But I will also say that sometimes I have that with the women on the Board, because there are much stronger personalities. There are new women on the Board this year that are new to the organization, and they sometimes overshadow some of the Board members that have been on the Board for a longer time and they’re quieter, and so I constantly have to [manage] for balance. Just the people, but also making sure that you’re not letting men ‘mansplain’ or dominate a conversation, and making sure all voices are heard. But I feel like that is necessary not only across gender lines, but in all situations.”

Intersection of Race and Gender

A commitment to eliminating racism by explicitly working at all organizational levels was present throughout the leaders’ comments. The methods articulated were accomplished through philosophical changes, training and education, and representative Board composition, among others. The following quotes represent some of the organizational processes described:
“We looked for one ethnic representative for each male, as our first.”

“Leaning towards diversity if we can first, so that people don’t feel that they’re being recruited just because they’re Black, or just being recruited because they’re Latino, or just because they’re Asian. We really do want to talk about the values and skills that those people bring, and then looking at how that fits within our matrix of having a diversity matrix on our Board. But we don’t start by that, because I really do believe that’s tokenism.”

“I think more we are changing related to our attentiveness to our anti-racism work. We honor the land we live on. We are having a whole discussion around ‘Robert’s Rules of Order’ and how that limits conversation and candor. But that’s all related to how we welcome more voices to the conversation from underrepresented folks. Not so much gender. We’re majority women.”

“We were very deliberate about recruiting and, it sounds like a bad joke, but when I started recruiting, I wanted to focus on multiple ethnicities, and so we made sure that we literally had one Latino, one Caucasian, one Asian, and one Black [individual].”

“What I’ve always been very candid about is the racial justice work is probably not as ‘intentional’ as we would like it to be…. But what we have been clear about and are really just starting to look at is, ‘What is intentional programming around racial justice?’”

“We start with the skill-based and what are the skills that we need on the Board. And we have diversity as one of the metrics, but not the reason that we would go out and recruit somebody. I will tell you I have been recruited just because I’m Latina, and it’s just not a good feeling, to feel that you’re being recruited because of the color of your skin.”

Some of the executive leaders expressed that this is where they in fact find the greatest challenge related to inclusion: making sure that race, gender, and economics are centered in their recruitment approaches, staff training and development, and community representation.
Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Although participants were not asked directly about Board inclusion related to sexual orientation and gender identity, a combined 60% of the leadership either had current Board members who openly identified as lesbian or gay or were already thinking about how to make their Board processes more inclusive in broader ways. Additionally, as reflected in the comments below, at least 40% of participants were thinking specifically about trans inclusion related to both Board members and consumers:

“In terms of our process, yes. The only difference is that we were looking for specific male colleagues. We also are very deliberate about finding openly gay Board members as well. We have one gender non-conforming [individual], and at least two openly gay Board members. One male and one female.”

“But it helped this Board move along in their learning to a point where I think they are far more open to the concept of gender as a non-binary, fluid social construct or concept, and that we need to be open to change in this regard in a way they hadn’t been previously.”

“And so when I go to these national meetings sometimes and they talk about women, I’m always the one raising my hand and saying, ‘What women? All women? Do you mean trans women?’ And they don’t. Some of them do not mean trans women, and they will say that.”

“And not that it’s not always great from the National, but there’s usually somebody in the audience who is like, ‘You know, whatever,’ still back in being a Christian organization or whatever. I can’t make excuses for their bad behavior. ‘Nope. Women are women. It’s only women. We don’t want men, we don’t want trans women. You have to be women by birth.’ I’m like, “Okay, this isn’t for me.”

“Our charter talks about diversity, equity in every sense of the word, which included men and women and transgender [individuals], and race, and ethnicity. We include all of that in our definition of race and social justice. It’s not just about the color of your skin; it’s about your gender, how you identify yourself, your religion, communities that you represent. It’s all across the board.”

“There was push back from some of our older donors because of the lack of understanding the definition of ‘non-binary.’ So I telephoned them to explain the rationale for changing the name.”
Even when leaders expressed their commitment to having an open and intersectional approach to moving towards greater inclusion, they also acknowledged the difference in how that might look with regard to practical implementation. There is also a recognition of managing the tension that exists regarding philosophical differences between some of the local Association member organizations and the national YWCA USA office.

Benefits and Challenges to Establishing a Gender-inclusive Board

Leaders were also asked to provide, as a final outcome measure, any feedback or information that could be given concerning any short and long-term impact observed or experienced as a result of their decision to make this organizational change. The quotes listed encompass some of these observations and experiences:

“The men on our Board are heavily engaged, and we’re actually adding two, the two of those are coming with a lot of resources for the organization as well. So it absolutely has benefited us, on the resource and the engagement fronts.”

“Because of the gender norms that existed, men were given certain opportunities and have risen to the decision-making power in most companies and in most organizations, that we need to be able to put to use for ourselves, for the YWCA.”

“We also did a video a number of years ago for our big Annual Luncheon. It brought tears to people’s eyes. We had all these different men come to the YWCAs from all walks of life from the community, and there were different signs they could make up and hold up. I can’t remember so much. But the whole title was It Takes Each of Us; It Takes All of Us. And it was all about different men in the community talking about why they care about our mission and our work. We also used that as a tool to educate our community. Domestic violence is not just a women’s issue.”

Final Thoughts and Experiences

All of the leaders interviewed were transparent and thoughtful about their own organizational process and the national Board’s process for moving towards greater diversity and equity. The thoughts reflected in these final comments provide both an opportunity to interrogate the internal work of the YWCA and to open up possibilities for growth to have deeper social impact. Leaders offered the national task force the following final thoughts of reflection about the process:
“In the pool of inequality, we have to drop a stone somewhere. Our looking at women and girls of color is a point of inclusion and not exclusion in a pool of inequality.”

“If we thought that we would have gotten to gender equity by only being led by women, we would have gotten there already. Men have a role in moving us towards equity, but I don’t think they have a role in taking leadership in the area.”

“Our philosophy is to call people in, not out. And that is just so different from twenty years ago that I – who knows. But I don’t think it has anything to do with having men on our Board. It’s more about the change of our focus.”

“One thing I’m going to say is that, especially with the gender identity piece, it has really opened up partnerships with our Rainbow Center, with our LGBTQ Youth Center and Adult Center. It has really opened up those doors to really have really true partnerships with them, because they know we’re here for them, and we have the back of their clients and vice-versa. And frankly, I think it allows us to really show the community that we are living our mission. Peace, justice, dignity for everyone – does it really mean everyone? To me, we’re just personifying our mission in the truest sense of the word, and our community knows us for this.”

“I would say our major donors today are between the ages of 40 and 70, and I would say 50/50 men and women. It might be more men than women. But there are people who – the old legacy donors were matrons of the community. That’s who the YW was, this white-gloved – it was a status thing to be on the YWCA Board. Today we are recognized more as ‘rabble’ — well, not rabble, but fearless advocates for social change.”

“I think that it’s really great that they are undertaking this process, and I think that just the transparency of saying that we understand that it’s going to be, what could be a shift, and as a national leader, we’re thinking through these things. But I do think that, especially in today’s age, I do think that it’s just really valuable to have those voices at the table as well and to be able to be mobilizing allies.”
RECOMMENDATIONS
(taken from interview transcripts)

These recommendations are a reflection of the executive leadership specifically, as well as the responses replicated within the implementation strategies employed broadly throughout the thinking and planning processes. Additionally, they are organized by interview protocol question areas.

Mission and Vision Alignment

“Really get clear on what they mean when they say ‘women.’ And if it doesn’t include all women, be clear about that, so that trans women feel welcomed to be part of our YWCA movement.”

“Lead by example. I think that in the 21st Century, to have antiquated policies that are exclusionary-based policies goes in the face of what we are trying to create relative to inclusion. Particularly gender-based exclusion, I just don’t think it’s a good look for us, and I think it feels antiquated.”

“Develop explicit statements and strategies related to the intersection of race and gender.”

“The ‘curb cut effect’ – where everyone has greater access. When we center women and girls, it makes it better for everyone. It’s how we have conversations with men about men’s work.”

Organizational Change Process

“If we change it then it takes the onus off of all the individual markets to change it one by one. So I think it puts us in – it modernizes our organization in how we want to show up in the world. Some of the pushback that we had at the time was that we don’t look like women can do it, but then we quickly got to, ‘Well, we can do it, but we just shouldn’t have to do it by ourselves.’ So I just think that there’s no valid argument for hanging onto that, and it just makes us look old.”

“Provide guidance document on developing clear communication plans (messaging, press releases, and methodology) for gathering input and communicating any changes. Changes should be in alignment with the national organization.”
Board Composition

“Develop guidance that provides a roadmap for Association members that increases knowledge related to the philosophical, legal, and practical implications to considering an expanded diverse and inclusive Board membership and leadership.”

“Increase the number of Board members to a maximum, not a requirement, to add more diversity to the board if needed.”

Recruitment and Engagement

“Move with clarity and focus related to guidance on Board composition as it relates to organizational needs, gaps, and mission alignment.”

“Develop guidance (through documents and/or possible training) for Association members to support conscientious recruitment, vetting, and on-boarding processes.”

“Develop guidelines on recruitment and implementation strategies to be shared with Association members focused broadly on the intersection of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and community representation.”

Implementation Strategies

“I would say the only good feedback would be to make sure and involve the locals that are doing really great work around this and working with them, and not feel that they have to be in this alone, but to really reach out to those of us that are leading this in our own communities, and come together with them and embrace that together as an organization that we’re all committed to.”

“A lot of us locally are doing a lot of great work in this area, not just our community, and versus re-inventing the wheel, I think it would be great to share those best practices and put together something for National that can be a real model for everybody.”
CONCLUSION

Throughout each interview and group conversation, the executive leadership provided honest, focused, and practical information to reflect their organizational journey. Gendered organizations are increasingly being asked to examine their existence through a gender-inclusive and diverse prism. Current social and political changes require a much more nuanced and contoured approach to living out the mission of these very important and unique organizations.

The YWCA USA holds membership within a particular cohort of organizations focused on the empowerment of women and girls with both shared and divergent experiences. Each leader offered candid recommendations and opportunities to support local and national alignment in moving the entire YWCA Association membership forward in the advancement of equity and gender justice. The YWCA USA is well-positioned through its membership to continue to expand upon the many programs and services offered to move its mission forward in support of individuals, families, and diverse communities around the country.

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