Room for Improvement: Women on Canadian Boards

October 4, 2000 – It is hardly a record to be proud of.

The proportion of women on Canadian boards of directors, depending on the estimate, is between 6.0 and 9.4%.

At the current rate of increase, Canadian women will have to wait until 2080 to achieve parity with men as directors!

These figures are in sharp contrast to the growing numbers of women managers. In 1998, women made up approximately 37% of all managers nationally, compared to only 16% in 1971.

Clearly, there is work to be done. A new publication from the Canadian Policy Research Networks identifies what is needed to increase the presence of women on corporate boards.

"Women and Corporate Directorships in Canada: Trends and Issues" is written by Karen Hughes, a professor of Women's Studies and of Sociology at the University of Alberta. The Canadian Pacific Charitable Foundation provided funding for the project.

Based on interviews with experts in board and director recruitment and a thorough search of the academic and business literature, the report examines the situation of women directors, and highlights past trends, current issues and prospects for change.

"There is enormous scope for improving both the presence and contribution of women on boards of directors," says Hughes. "Calls for better corporate governance and more professional board practices help, but change won't happen quickly or of its own accord."

The report uncovers several barriers to the advancement of women:

- Traditional recruitment practices and selection criteria often unintentionally favour men.
- The predominance of men can lead to undervaluing the contribution of women.

There is a failure to mentor potential women candidates.

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Among the initiatives proposed for improving the presence of women on boards are:

- Developing female directors through education, experience and mentoring.
- Identifying and promoting “best practices” to encourage more professional board recruiting.
- Educating boards, shareholders and other stakeholders on the value of women directors.

“There is a growing pool of qualified women with the experience and skills boards need,” Hughes argues. “Pressure from informed consumers and shareholders, and advocacy by companies with successful women directors, could help bring about a change that will benefit not just women, but also the companies they serve.”

CPRN’s President, Judith Maxwell, says the report breaks new ground. “One of its strengths is the identification of the skills boards are looking for in future candidates,” she says. “The report provides a practical road map that will help bridge the gap between boards in search of good talent and women in search of a place at the board table.”

You can access or download a copy of the document by clicking here.

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