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Changing the game: Inclusion for women in the business of sports

Making the sports industry fairer and more inclusive for women will change the game for everyone.

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Life isn't always fair. Yet, of all the fields of human endeavor, sports is one where we demand a level playing field. Teams don't start games a goal down, and rules are rules, to be applied evenly to all participants.

So why do many women in sports administration still feel sidelined?

We surveyed almost 1,700 women in the business of sports in North America to understand both how inclusive they perceive their organizations to be and how personally included they feel within their organizations. This research, which is the first of its kind in the industry, yielded some striking results. The experience of women in sports administration trails what we typically see on every dimension of inclusion, from the negative effects of workplaces dominated by men to a lack of support for advancement and even how much work women in leadership roles are expected to do compared with their counterparts who are men.

How can these unspoken but long-standing industry rules be rewritten? This report examines experiences of inclusion for women working in the business of sports, the impact of not creating inclusive spaces for women, and the ways that sports and other industries dominated by men can create workplaces where employees of all genders can survive and thrive.

This is not a nice-to-have; it's a business priority. The findings for women in sports administration echo our past research in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—particularly on women in media and entertainment and in tech,¹ as well as on Black talent in film and TV and in tech.² Companies in the top quartile for gender or racial and ethnic diversity are more likely to have financial returns above their national industry medians.³ In sports administration

specifically, women are 2.8 times more likely to leave their jobs when they do not feel included. Sports organizations that take early action stand to be big winners.

Women on the sidelines: What we found

DEI has become significantly more prominent in society and the industry since the passage of Title IX more than half a century ago. Yet growth opportunities for women on the business side of the sports industry remain scarce. While women lag behind men on all three dimensions of DEI,⁴ lack of inclusion comes at a high cost, not just for women experiencing it but also for sports organizations and their many stakeholders.

Lower levels of inclusion compared with other industries

Across the board, women in the sports industry reported lower scores for inclusion compared with a composite benchmark of women in other industries (Exhibit 1). (For an overview of the terms used in the exhibit, see sidebar "Key terms.")

Our survey found that women who don't feel included are almost three times more likely to leave their organizations, which inevitably poses a competitive risk: after all, companies with gender-diverse executive teams are 25 percent more likely to outperform less-diverse organizations (for more on our analysis, see sidebar "About our research").⁵

There are glimmers of hope: about 80 percent of respondents reported some positive experiences at the individual level, such as working with peers who treat them with respect and leaders who are flexible and make accommodations when personal situations arise. Yet this support did not always translate to feelings that their organizations were inclusive and able to set them up for success. Only

¹ Lucas Beard, Jonathan Dunn, Jess Huang, and Alexis Krivkovich, "Shattering the glass screen," McKinsey, February 13, 2020; "Repairing the broken rung on the career ladder for women in technical roles," McKinsey, March 1, 2022.

² Jonathan Dunn, Sheldon Lyn, Nony Onyeador, and Ammanuel Zegeye, "Black representation in film and TV: The challenges and impact of increasing diversity," McKinsey, March 11, 2021; Jan Shelly Brown, Matthew Finney, Mark McMillan, and Chris Perkins, "How to close the Black tech talent gap," McKinsey Institute for Black Economic Mobility, February 3, 2023.

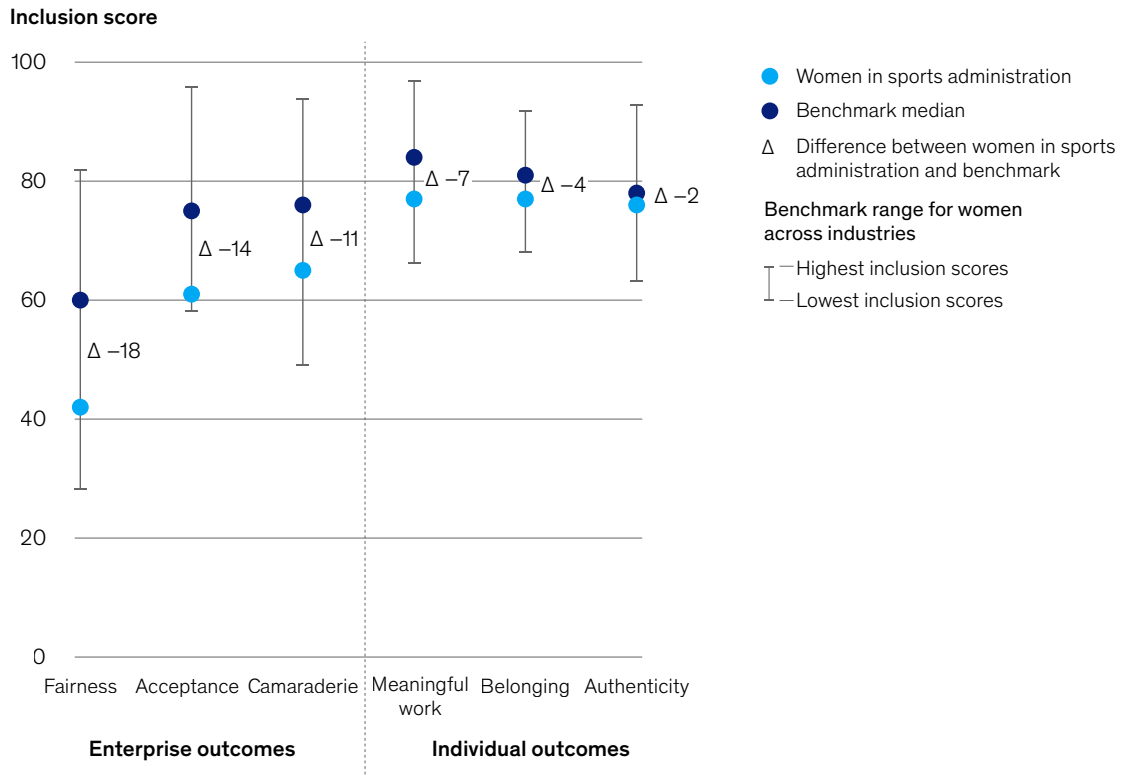
³ Dame Vivian Hunt, Dennis Layton, and Sara Prince, "Why diversity matters," McKinsey, January 1, 2015.

⁴ For more, see Richard E. Lapchick, *The 2021 Sports Media Racial and Gender Report Card: Associated Press Sports Editors (APSE)*, The Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport (TIDES), September 2021.

⁵ Sundiatu Dixon-Fyle, Kevin Dolan, Dame Vivian Hunt, and Sara Prince, "Diversity wins: How inclusion matters," McKinsey, May 19, 2020.

Exhibit 1

Inclusion in the sports industry trails the cross-industry benchmark.



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26 percent of respondents said their organizations provide employees with the mentorship and coaching they need to be successful.

Only a small percentage of women in the sports industry said they work in an inclusive workplace. While women in leadership roles generally expressed a sense of belonging at work and said they could be their authentic selves, nonleaders said they experience low levels of all forms of inclusion covered in the survey (Exhibit 2). Only women who had reached the executive level had noticeably more positive experiences of camaraderie and fairness within their organizations.

A perception that the industry is unfair to women

Of all enterprise outcomes, fairness—the degree to which respondents believe employees receive equitable treatment and opportunities to succeed—

scored lowest in sports and lowest relative to other industries. Only 42 percent of respondents agreed that their organizations were fair, with only executive-level women having more positive views (68 percent of them said that their organizations were fair).

Despite their higher perceptions of fairness, women at executive levels acknowledged that their positive experiences were not typical. “I feel that I have had a great experience where I have worked, but I don’t feel like my experience is the norm [in the industry],” one executive said.

Executive-level women in the sports industry also said that even women in leadership positions often do not have the same power or decision-making abilities as their counterparts who are men.

Key terms

Based on an inclusion assessment,¹ the inclusion survey asked respondents to rate their experiences in their organizations on a number of dimensions. The language from the survey appears in the exhibits of this report. Here is how we define those terms for the purposes of the research.

Acceptance: the degree to which employees value and embrace diversity

Authenticity: the degree to which individuals feel encouraged to be themselves and speak up at work

Belonging: how much individuals feel connected to others at work

Camaraderie: the degree to which employees have strong bonds and work together toward shared goals

Collective identity: the degree to which employees feel unified around an overarching purpose

Enterprise outcomes: perceptions of the culture and dynamics within an organization

Fairness: the degree to which employees are treated equitably, including in the opportunities they have to succeed

Individual outcomes: employees' perceptions of their personal experiences at work

Meaningful work: the degree to which individuals feel valued and that their work has meaning to them

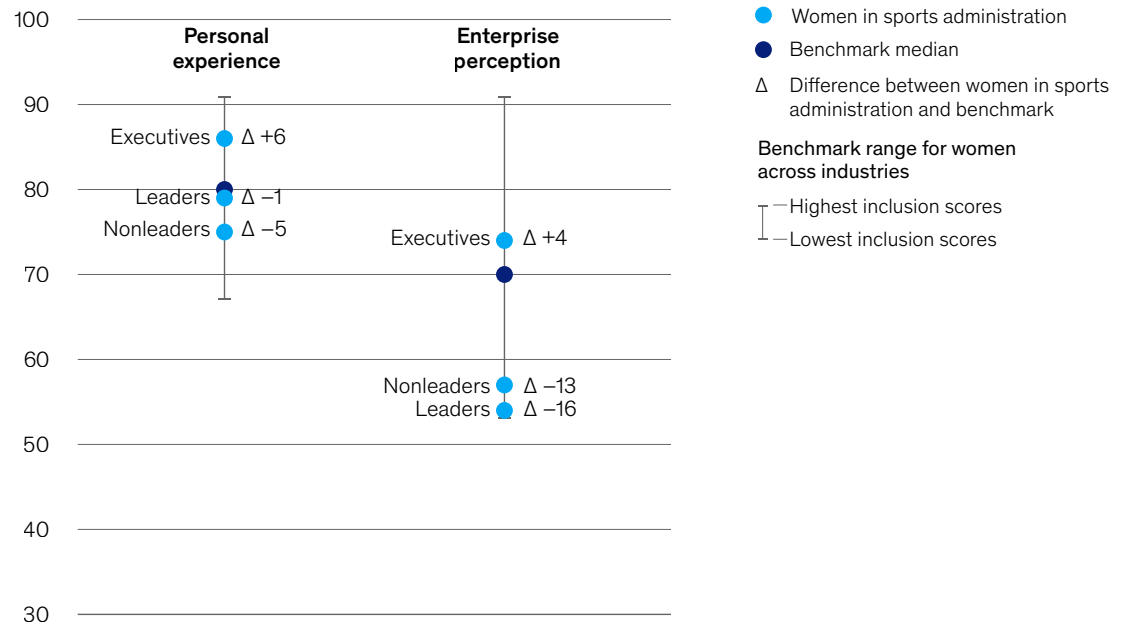
Protective mechanisms: the degree to which employees feel that disrespectful or biased behaviors at work are discouraged and can be reported

¹ *People & Organization Blog*, "Inclusion doesn't happen by accident: Measuring inclusion in a way that matters," blog entry by Diana Ellsworth, Drew Goldstein, and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, February 16, 2021.

Exhibit 2

Women senior leaders are much more likely to regard their organizations as inclusive compared with women in more junior roles.

Inclusion scores by role



Note: The number of respondents in each category is as follows: senior leaders, n = 67; leaders (including senior managers, directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents), n = 603; managers and individual contributors, n = 856.

Sponsorship and mentorship are integral to supporting career advancement and development, both of which are central to how organizations are perceived.

“A lot of women opt out,” one said. “There’s an alarming number of women who are seeking roles outside of athletics because they are not having their voices heard. Many women are in roles that do not allow them to make decisions.”

This is not unique to sports. McKinsey’s *Women in the Workplace 2022* report found that across industries, women are typically more concentrated in junior roles, and C-level women are often in support roles.⁶

Other potential hurdles to creating a fair environment include blurred lines between work and social settings, private or family-owned small organizations, and the inherently competitive nature of sports.

“Everyone wants to compete about everything,” one interviewee said. “There’s more of an insular feeling to it, where decision makers feel that people need a background in sports to work in sports. That insularity creates a boys’ club.”

Interestingly, women working for sports teams reported higher levels of inclusion than those working for sports leagues (for more on the breakdown between our two largest groups of respondents, see sidebar “Teams versus leagues”). Yet interviewees generally expressed frustration about hiring practices and processes that make it harder for women to access opportunities. “In

sports, people know they’re going to be [in their organizations or roles] for a long time,” one interviewee said. “They always hire or promote their buddies. It isn’t a meritocracy at all.”

The impact of working in environments dominated by men

Like most industries, the business side of sports remains dominated by men. Our research indicates that women are in the minority across levels; 63 percent of respondents said their primary manager or supervisor is a man. In addition, 57 percent of respondents reported typically interacting with more men than women, and about 20 percent of this group typically interact almost exclusively with men during the workday. This is alarming because working in such spaces can have negative effects for both employers and employees. Women who work in environments that are heavily dominated by men reported feeling less included. In addition, they said they experience significantly more microaggressions, such as being interrupted and having their judgment and competence questioned (Exhibit 3). It is therefore not surprising that these women also reported being more likely to leave their jobs than their peers on more-diverse teams.

These experiences can affect how respondents contribute and see themselves and other women.

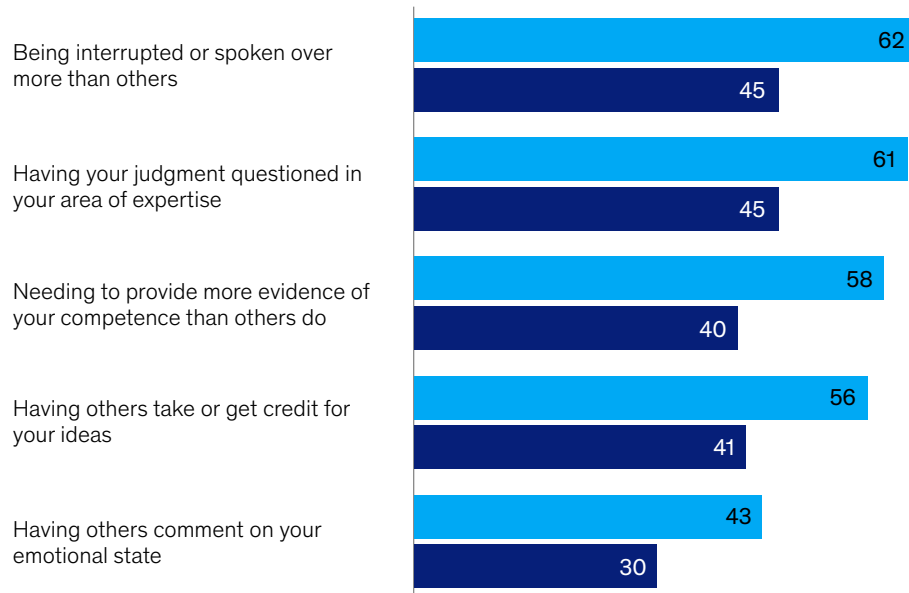
⁶ “Women in the Workplace 2022,” McKinsey, October 18, 2022.

Exhibit 3

Women who work mostly with men report significantly greater instances of microaggressions.

Women who report experiencing certain microaggressions, %

- Women who interact with all men or mostly men (57% of respondents)
- Women who interact with equal numbers of men and women or more women (43% of respondents)



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One interviewee said she was often underestimated just because she's a woman. "I'm even underestimated by other women," she said. Another interviewee reported feeling intimidated and alone. "It felt like no one could relate to me and that I was on an island," she said.

The effects of this isolation are exacerbated for women with intersectional identities. Black survey respondents had consistently lower inclusion scores compared with their White counterparts and reported even more microaggressions (Exhibit 4), a finding that parallels other industries.⁷

LGBTQ+ women in sports administration also experienced lower levels of inclusion compared with women in other industries, although only when they felt unable to be open about their sexual orientation at work.⁸ These findings point to the importance of creating an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing important aspects of their lives and identities without fear of judgment or bias.

A lack of support for advancement

Sponsorship and mentorship are integral to supporting career advancement and development,

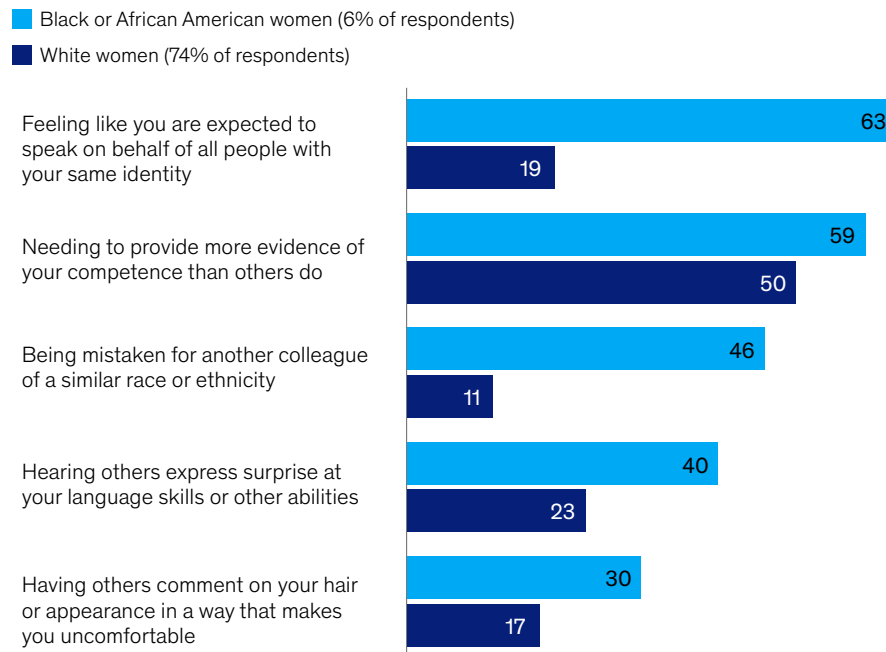
⁷ "Women in the Workplace 2022," October 18, 2022.

⁸ The LGBTQ+ demographic includes respondents who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and asexual. To avoid conflating gender identity and sexual orientation, we consider respondents who identify as transgender as part of the analysis on gender identity, not sexual orientation.

Exhibit 4

Black women are more likely to experience microaggressions than their White counterparts.

Women who report experiencing certain microaggressions, %



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About our research

We administered a 118-question survey to 1,675 self-identified women who worked in the business of sports as of January 2022.

Respondents had an average of five to ten years of experience in the industry and were located across two countries: in 40 US states and five Canadian provinces. They represented more than 25 sports, 15 business types, and 25 job functions, including marketing, sponsorship, and management or administration.

Just under half of the survey respondents worked for professional sports teams; about 19 percent worked for professional sports leagues; and 7 percent worked in sports

media. The remainder were at not-for-profits, agencies, ticketing organizations, sponsors, academic institutions, governing bodies, professional-services organizations, sports betting companies, and players' associations.

The survey draws on our inclusion assessment, which measures different dimensions of inclusion.¹ The assessment measures respondents' personal experiences of inclusion, as well as their perceptions of enterprise-level inclusion (what we call "enterprise perception"). The inclusion outcomes and practices that drive these personal experiences and enterprise perceptions are measured across peers or teammates, leaders, and systems.²

In addition to questions based on the inclusion assessment, survey questions explored respondents' experiences with advancement, mentorship and sponsorship, and resources and support. We derived cross-industry insights by comparing the survey results against responses from women in other industries who have participated in similar surveys. Finally, we gained qualitative insights by interviewing 13 women in leadership roles within the sports industry.

¹ *People & Organization Blog*, "Inclusion doesn't happen by accident: Measuring inclusion in a way that matters," blog entry by Diana Ellsworth, Drew Goldstein, and Bill Schaninger, McKinsey, February 16, 2021.

² *Ibid.*

both of which are central to how organizations are perceived. Research has already shown that women often struggle to find sponsors, internal leaders who increase the likelihood of an employee being promoted by taking co-ownership of the employee's career and advocating for her.⁹ Just 38 percent of respondents in the sports industry said that they had at least one sponsor.

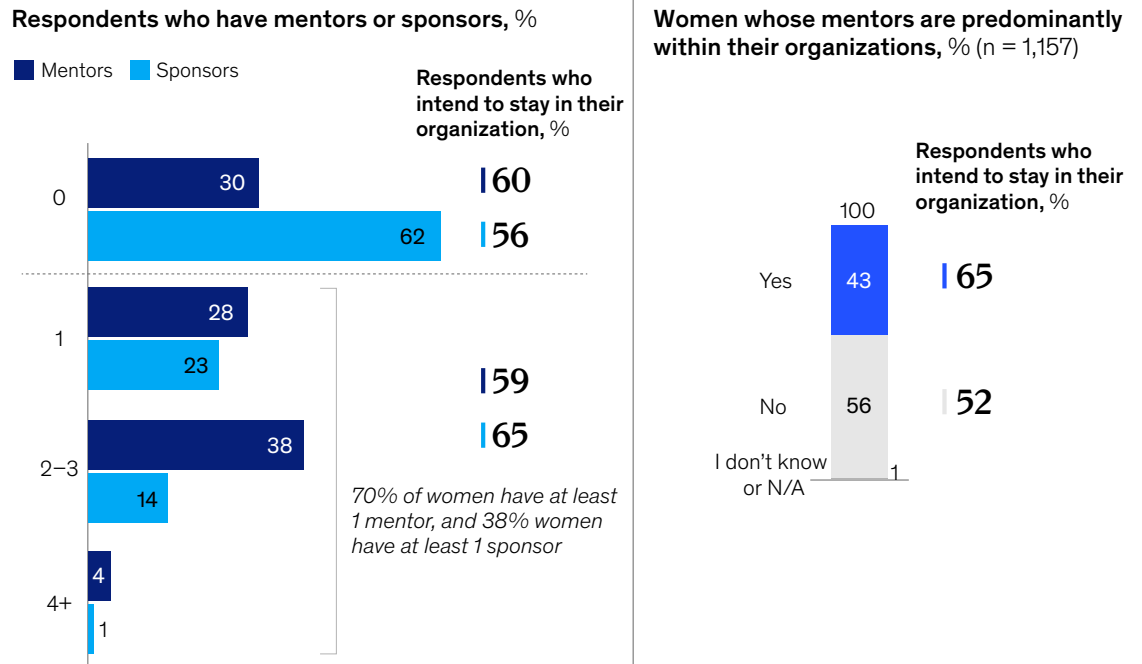
Productive mentorship experiences also matter, but women in sports administration don't necessarily have access to them either. While 70 percent of respondents said they have at least one mentor—someone who supports their development and career growth—only 43 percent said their mentors are primarily within their organization. Internal mentors increase the odds of promotion and help retention: simply having a mentor is not enough to change a woman's intent to stay at an organization,

but having internal mentors increases the intent to stay by 13 percentage points, while having a sponsor increases women's intent to stay by 8 percentage points (Exhibit 5). Only 38 percent of respondents frequently experience mentorship behaviors, compared with 52 percent of women in the broader benchmark population.

Of course, sponsorship and mentorship are irrelevant if good opportunities for advancement are not available at an organization. We found that 62 percent of respondents in the sports industry felt they had the right skills to progress, a higher proportion than the 44 percent of women across other industries. Yet 51 percent of women from the sports industry who feel prepared to progress believe they need to leave their organization to fully realize their career goals (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 5

Women in sports administration are more likely to have mentors than sponsors, and their mentors are mostly outside their organizations.



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⁹ Herminia Ibarra, "A lack of sponsorship is keeping women from advancing into leadership," McKinsey, August 19, 2019.

Exhibit 6

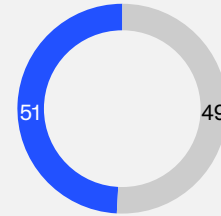
Most women in sports administration who are ready to progress believe they need to leave their organizations to do so.

Are you prepared to progress to the next level in your career?, % of respondents

- No, I need to refine my nontechnical skills (eg, communication, leadership, relationship management) **15**
- I don't know, or I need more feedback **11**
- No, I need additional technical or functional skills (eg, programming) **11**
- No, I need to increase the quality of my network or number of people in my network (number of sponsors, higher-level sponsors) **8**
- I have the technical or leadership skills and leadership support to progress to the next level **62**

Action that respondents who are ready to progress feel will help them achieve their career aspirations, %

- Remain employed at current company
- Seek employment at another company



Across other industries, a lower proportion (**44%**) of women feel ready to progress

Note: Figures sum to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one response.

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Teams versus leagues

Almost 70 percent of our survey respondents work for professional sports leagues or professional sports teams. Disentangling the results of the two populations suggests women have nuanced experiences of inclusion in the two settings, with the distinctive characteristics of each possibly making some inclusion practices easier to enact than others.

Teams and leagues both lag behind the benchmark of women in other industries. However, respondents working for teams reported higher levels of inclusion than those working for leagues, mainly due to higher ratings within sports teams for collective identity, or unity around an overarching purpose. This difference may stem from sports teams' smaller workplaces, which may more easily foster a shared identity.

Leagues received higher ratings for protective mechanisms, defined as the degree to which employees feel that disrespectful or biased behaviors at work are discouraged and can be reported. Because leagues are larger workplaces than teams, it may be easier to confidentially raise concerns about disrespectful behaviors and avoid being perceived as detracting from the close-knit community.

While the causes may be at least partly structural—for instance, small organizations may have employees who stay in their roles for long periods of time—this number is higher than the corresponding average for women in the workplace overall. As one woman in the industry put it, “One of the things about sports is that people don’t leave. You have to leave to advance.”

Women leaders are taking on more

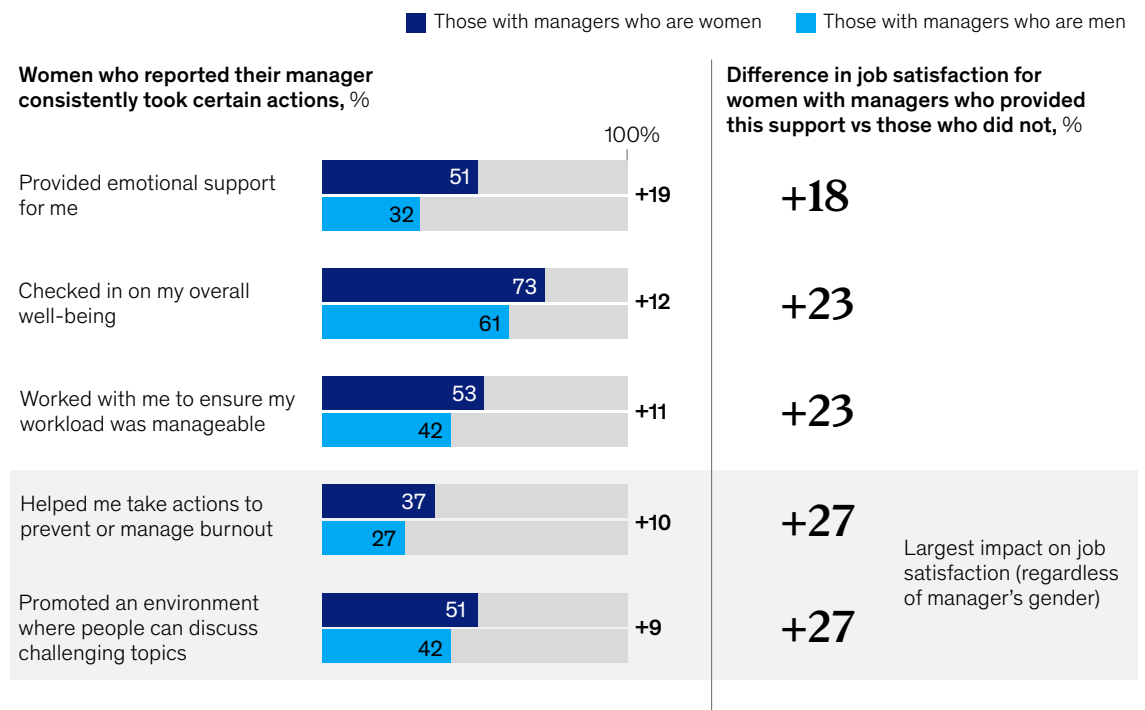
Women consistently report more burnout than men in our research, and the burnout gap between men and women nearly doubled from 2020 to 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In the sports industry, we also found that women managers consistently take responsibility for managing their teams’ well-being (Exhibit 7).

This phenomenon is not unique to sports. Efforts to support employees’ well-being create personal and business value. Employees who receive emotional and psychological support from their managers are likely to be more satisfied with their jobs and more excited to work for their companies. They’re also less likely to consider leaving.¹¹ Women leaders we interviewed underscored the importance of this support in helping them get to where they are today.

“The role that I’m in now came because of another woman,” one said. “She extended her hand and was a helpful resource and mentor, providing avenues for me when I didn’t even know I needed them.”

Exhibit 7

Women managers do more than their peers who are men to support the well-being of their teams.



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¹⁰ “Women in the Workplace 2022,” October 18, 2022.

¹¹ For more on burnout, see “Addressing employee burnout: Are you solving the right problem?,” McKinsey Health Institute, May 27, 2022.

Another noted an “obligation to pay it forward to the next generation. I want my daughters to feel like they can do anything.”

But the task of creating emotional and psychological environments in which employees and teams can thrive should not fall disproportionately on women, who often shoulder significant responsibilities at home in addition to work.¹² Men have an opportunity to engage more in this care-oriented work in the office, which would benefit employees and free up more women leaders to coach, mentor, and sponsor employees with fewer trade-offs.

Making women full teammates

It is one thing to identify a playing field that is not level. It is quite another to rewrite the rules—whether formal or unwritten—to ensure everyone gets a fair shot. Sports organizations can take a range of steps, starting with putting inclusive leaders in place and building a shared understanding that everyone has a role in creating an inclusive workplace.

Improving DEI takes time and requires people to examine the systems surrounding them while also acknowledging their own biases. But many organizations struggle to create the conditions that encourage the development of inclusive leaders and teammates. Most attempts to build inclusion capabilities fail because DEI efforts aren't consistent, made up of stand-alone trainings. Organizations also often lack the required subject matter expertise to facilitate difficult conversations and may approach training as a check-the-box exercise rather than a springboard for meaningful, long-term behavioral change.¹³

Substantive conversations are needed. The approach can be as simple as hosting forums for participants to share experiences and create greater understanding. Or organizations could lean in to multiformat learning journeys and leadership

programs that build the specific mindsets and skill sets that drive inclusion.

Regardless of the approach, a comprehensive program starts with leaders and aims to create a common language and new norms for all employees over time. This practice requires leaders to model the changes they want to see in their organizations and to call people in—rather than calling them out—to help everyone learn and grow.¹⁴ People need opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and quantify their progress to accelerate application over time. Each of the areas detailed in this section aims to build inclusion capabilities within organizations and to upskill employees to create the change necessary to improve DEI.

Developing fairer organizations

Organizations can create a fairer environment by ensuring that processes, resources, and opportunities are accessible and fairly allocated. We have identified two specific areas sports organizations can focus on to improve fairness: debiasing people processes and ensuring all employees have the resources and work-life support they need to be successful.

Debiasing people processes. Humans are predisposed to bias. For example, leaders across industries often engage in “mini me” bias—hiring, mentoring, and sponsoring people like them.¹⁵ Organizations can take debiasing measures for all people-related processes, such as ensuring that opportunities are shared across the team or organization, rather than with a select few individuals, and giving women the same decision-making authority as men.

Organizations can also adjust performance-management processes. Managers can be trained to be aware of evaluation biases and implement structural checks throughout the process, such as appointing “bias watchers” to help identify

¹² “Women in the Workplace 2022,” October 18, 2022.

¹³ Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, “Why doesn't diversity training work? The challenge for industry and academia,” *Anthropology Now*, September 2018, Volume 10, Number 2; David F. Arena Jr. et al., “Expanding how we think about diversity training,” *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 2020, Volume 13, Number 2.

¹⁴ For more on calling in as an alternative to calling out, see Jessica Bennett, “What if instead of calling people out, we called them in?,” *New York Times*, updated February 24, 2021.

¹⁵ Salma Shah, “Equality: Unconscious bias and the mini-me syndrome,” *HR* magazine, November 11, 2010.

potential issues. Sports organizations can also train managers about biases that can appear in coaching and feedback conversations. For example, many employees don't get accurate feedback in the workplace because managers don't know how to deliver developmental feedback. This happens more often with employees from underrepresented groups because managers often feel uncomfortable having difficult conversations with people from different backgrounds.¹⁶

Avoiding uncomfortable but constructive feedback may feel better for both parties in the moment, but it hurts the affected employee's development and career progression. When employees with underrepresented identities miss out on constructive feedback over time, existing inequities can be exacerbated. As one interviewee said, "The perception was that women can't handle it. People were hesitant to give me feedback, but that doesn't help me."

These debiasing efforts may be especially important in smaller organizations such as teams and not-for-profits, where hiring may be less frequent, decisions are made by a smaller set of people, and structured cohorts or role responsibilities may be less feasible. In this context, the decisions of a few people can have an outsize effect, which makes rigorous debiasing for people processes even more important.

Evaluating policies that support work–life balance.

Sports organizations can also critically evaluate their policies on work–life balance. Only 28 percent of our survey respondents felt encouraged to disconnect from work during nonwork hours, and just 30 percent had resources to help fulfill their nonwork responsibilities.

To be sure, the sports industry is intense, and many events take place outside of typical work hours. However, it is important to consider the work–life needs of all employees, especially women and women of color, who often have more caretaking responsibilities at home than men.¹⁷

Creating more-inclusive environments for all employees in the sports industry requires supportive policies not only to be in place but also to be actively used—by everyone. This would require leaders, including men, to use these policies themselves and encourage their teams to do so. The goal over time would be to build trust and acceptance throughout the organization and to ensure that using policies designed to create flexibility and balance between work and life demands does not negatively affect anyone's career.

Boosting mentorship and sponsorship

As one executive in a professional sports league noted, mentorship is critical but works best as a mutually desired relationship rather than a prescribed or assigned one, which can feel forced. This also applies to sponsorship, and it's a reminder that many leaders aren't taught how to be good mentors or sponsors.

Sports organizations may need to be more intentional on both fronts. For example, organizations could build leaders' mentorship and sponsorship capabilities and help them understand the differences between the two. Leaders can be taught and coached on building genuine relationships with diverse employees and to address biases that may arise. For instance, women often have an easier time finding mentors than sponsors. Leaders could reflect on whether they themselves mentor women more than they sponsor them and whether they could or should rebalance mentorship and sponsorship. Leaders can learn how to give more effective coaching and feedback to mentees and to identify more day-to-day opportunities to create connections and strengthen career pathways for employees they sponsor, an evergreen skill.

Leaders' proactive guidance and counsel can have an outsize effect on women and other employees who receive less mentorship and sponsorship than their counterparts because of their identities. For these employees, the lack of one-on-one

¹⁶ *Women in the Workplace 2016*, LeanIn.Org and McKinsey, 2016; Elena Doldor, Jo Silvester, and Madeleine Wyatt, "Research: Men get more actionable feedback than women," *Harvard Business Review*, February 10, 2021; Darreonna Davis, "Black women are less likely to get quality feedback at work. That impacts their earnings and leadership opportunities over time," *Forbes*, June 15, 2022.

¹⁷ "Women in the Workplace 2022," October 18, 2022.

Ambitious organizations may invest in skill building to help all employees become more effective in fostering inclusion.

investment from a senior colleague or leader may seem normal and create blind spots about the importance of sponsorship or how to build these relationships with leaders. After all, it's difficult to exercise a skill—in this case, finding and activating sponsors and mentors—if one has not had many opportunities to practice.

To set the stage, organizations can help leaders overcome the common tendency to build relationships with people who are similar to them. Breaking this bias is especially important in sports administration because most women in the industry are still managed and led by men.

At an institutional level, organizations could consider implementing processes, capabilities, and KPIs to create and measure effective mentorship and sponsorship programs. A virtuous cycle can result from measuring, recognizing, and rewarding mentorship and sponsorship behaviors. In this way, behaviors that are beneficial for organizations but often informal and invisible—and disproportionately driven by women—can be properly reinforced, encouraging leaders of all genders to mentor and sponsor more actively.

Teaming up to create more supportive environments

Not everyone has the ability to sponsor someone's career, but everyone can play a role in creating a more supportive environment. While many women—especially managers—are adept at creating supportive environments for their teams, they cannot do it on their own, especially in an industry that continues to be dominated by men. Sports organizations have

an opportunity to distribute the load more evenly throughout the organization and amplify the benefits of supportive and inclusive leadership.

As a first step, organizations can show employees what a productive and supportive check-in or feedback conversation looks like, both between colleagues and between a manager and team member. Since what gets measured is often what gets done, sports organizations can consider incorporating inclusive behaviors into performance review criteria for leaders. Taking this one step further, they can go beyond traditional top-down performance-management programs and implement 360-degree reviews to assess a broader set of leadership dimensions by a larger group of people.

Finally, since creating supportive environments is truly a team effort, ambitious organizations may invest in skill building to help all employees become more effective in fostering inclusion, acting as effective allies, and developing the openness and ability to engage in difficult conversations.

Making minority status less relevant

Women in sports administration tend to find themselves in the minority—or the lone woman—because the industry simply does not have enough women. Sports organizations can address this problem by focusing on diversifying their talent pipelines and making staying within the industry more appealing or feasible. For instance, to increase recruitment of diverse talent, organizations could hire based on skills instead of on background, credentials, or an existing relationship with the organization.

They can also have conversations with hiring managers about the pitfalls of using culture fit as an important consideration. Although the harms are often unintentional, culture fit can be used to bypass a candidate who is perceived as not fitting in well socially with an existing group within the organization. The use of this criterion tends to penalize candidates with underrepresented identities, who are often by definition different and may have a harder time fitting in with an organization.

Both of these adjustments in the hiring process can also help organizations open up to and recruit candidates with valuable experience across a wider array of industries. Many of the women we interviewed mentioned the industry's preference for people who have experience in sports or sports administration. But people with underrepresented identities may face outside hurdles to get even early experience with the industry, which prevents them from being seen as a fit for jobs in sports organizations, and which ultimately makes it harder for the industry to diversify.

Sports organizations could also use their interconnectedness to their advantage. Industry-wide networking could foster greater connections and opportunities. These connections may be especially important for women in smaller organizations, who could use these opportunities to connect with other women in the industry for support. Organizations could also host regular workshops and discussions, which could be open to industry-wide participants and audiences, to heighten awareness and understanding about the challenges facing women and other underrepresented groups.

Moves like this could build important inclusion capabilities for the industry as a whole. One interviewee said, "There has been an acceptance and tolerance in sports. Saying 'This is how it is in sports' and that this is what you have to put up with to be in this sexy and exciting industry ... that's not the type of culture you want to foster."

These practices have proved helpful in other industries dominated by men, such as technology. Google's #IAmRemarkable initiative empowers and encourages women and other underrepresented groups to celebrate their achievements and connect with people both inside and outside of their organizations.¹⁸

Taking a stand

The business case for DEI continues to get stronger. Notably, the relationship between diversity on executive teams and the likelihood of financial outperformance has strengthened since we first measured it in 2014.¹⁹

Our research and experience have shown that companies that commit to DEI can move the needle and that, no matter the industry, real change requires ownership at the top.²⁰ Meaningful change in the business of sports will not happen without the full support of commissioners, CEOs, and other leaders.

Successful organizations and leaders across industries tend to do three things well when it comes to DEI:

They treat DEI as a priority and as an enabler of core business efforts. DEI needs the same level of commitment and attention as other executive agenda items, including the resources and budget required to have a sustained impact. This work can start with ensuring that a DEI leader is in place, that the mission is clear and measurable, and that the leader is positioned in the organization at the appropriate level to integrate DEI into the business and influence the way the business operates.²¹ Indeed, effective companies go beyond stand-alone DEI efforts and integrate DEI thinking and ways of working into how they run the business. Significantly, they also reinforce commitments to DEI as a core operational capability, even in challenging times.²² Leaders in sports could ask themselves: Is DEI among my top five priorities?

¹⁸ #IAmRemarkable," Google, accessed March 22, 2023.

¹⁹ For more, see "Diversity wins," May 19, 2020.

²⁰ "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Lighthouses 2023," McKinsey, January 13, 2023.

²¹ Drew Goldstein, Manveer Grewal, Ruth Imose, and Monne Williams, "Unlocking the potential of chief diversity officers," McKinsey, November 18, 2022.

²² For more, see Curtis Bunn, "Hamstrung by 'golden handcuffs': Diversity roles disappear 3 years after George Floyd's murder inspired them," NBC News, February 27, 2023.

They hold senior leaders accountable for outcomes, not just actions or inputs. As with all goals, setting, communicating, and tracking aspirations matters. Shifting leaders' goalposts from accomplishing specific actions to holding responsibility for outcomes can help improve the likelihood of making change and sustaining it in the longer term. Some companies have already published their DEI performance and goals. Biogen publishes DEI metrics²³; Target publishes its DEI progress and publicly commits to measures such as representation, advancement and retention, equitable experiences, and the experiences of diverse customers.²⁴ Humanyze publicized its mandatory parental leave for fathers, which aims to remove the stigma for men using such workplace policies and to create greater gender equity.²⁵

With these examples in mind, leaders in sports administration, particularly those who are in charge of DEI, could ask themselves: Do our metrics measure the experience of women and employees with other underrepresented identities? Or do they simply measure whether they are present in the organization?

They model the desired behaviors. Modeling from top leaders sets norms and expectations.

Actions—not just language—that condemn discrimination send a powerful message. One example is to enforce a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination or bias. Positive actions are also crucial. For example, a group of women CEOs in biotech gather annually to create opportunities for the next generation of women in the industry.²⁶ Sports industry executives could ask themselves: How many women are my team and I mentoring and sponsoring?

For all of the progress made in recent decades toward equality on the playing field, women still do not get a fair shot in the sports business. As one interviewee told us, many simply “decide that this isn't for them,” depriving the industry of potentially game-changing talent and perpetuating the sector's domination by men. Our first-of-its-kind findings on women's experiences in the business of sports make it clear that these unwritten rules of the game need to be changed and that doing so can not only drive fundamental fairness but also create better outcomes for all. Few pastimes incite the passion and dedication of sports. It is time for the organizations driving the industry to show the same passion and dedication to embracing diversity, equity, and inclusion.

²³“Diversity, Equity & Inclusion,” Biogen, accessed March 22, 2023.

²⁴2021 workforce diversity report, Target, accessed March 22, 2023; “We are never done: Inside Target's 2019-2021 diversity, equity & inclusion journey—and where we're going next,” Target, March 7, 2022.

²⁵Ben Waber, “Why I require new fathers who work for me to take paternity leave,” Quartz, May 22, 2018.

²⁶Kyle LaHucik, “‘Biotech sisterhood’: 25 female CEOs find new ways to ‘sponsor’ the next generation at Arizona retreat,” Fierce Biotech, March 16, 2022.

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The authors wish to thank the organization WISE (Women in Sports and Events) for its contributions to this report and to acknowledge Major League Soccer, the National Football League, and the National Hockey League for their efforts in helping to advance the research. The authors also wish to thank Shannon Cheng, Maggie Goloboy, Stephanie Madner, Shawn Postiglione, Daniel Sun, Monne Williams, and Jackie Wong for their contributions to this research.

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