



Game Changer:

The career-boosting
impact of athletic
participation for women
in leadership



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Research Collaborators

The Prosperity Project

The Prosperity Project is a Canadian not-for-profit organization that seeks to identify and remove the systemic barriers and biases that impede the advancement of women in the Canadian economy. The Prosperity Project supports several research initiatives as well as professional mentorship programs for women to advance in their careers. This report is part of the Canadian Household Perspectives series (CHP), which provides data-centered recommendations to support greater economic prosperity for women and Canada.

KPMG in Canada

KPMG in Canada is a full-service Audit, Tax and Advisory firm committed to creating impactful change for private sector, government, and not-for-profit clients. This includes change in the areas of economic empowerment and professional development of women in Canada.

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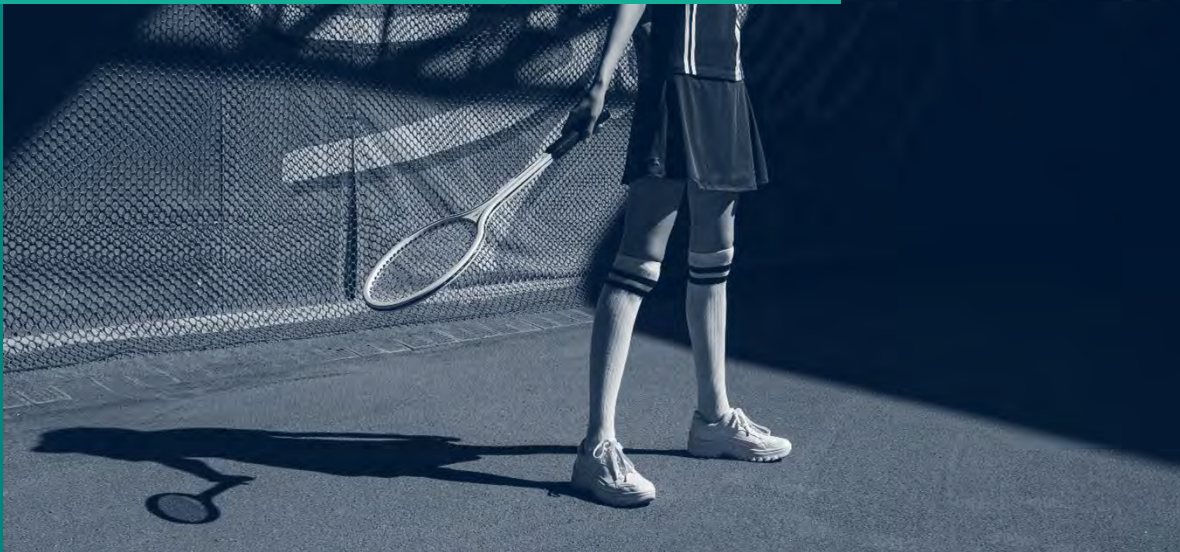
The data collected for this research is part of PhD candidate, Laura Nashman's forthcoming (2025) PhD dissertation at the University of Victoria.



Why we conducted this research

We conducted this research study to explore how women's presence and representation in corporate leadership roles relates to their involvement in sports and physical activities. In this context, sports and physical activities encompass both team and individual sports, as well as various fitness routines like regular fitness classes, high-intensity interval training, and consistent running.

Previous studies have shown that women in leadership positions are more likely to have a background in sports or physical activities and often identify as athletes. However, there is still a gap in research regarding the specific advantages that participating in sports and physical activities may provide, which could help increase female representation in corporate leadership roles.



Gould, D., & Voelker, D. K. (2012). Enhancing youth leadership through sport and physical education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, 83(8), 38-41.

Lenka, P., & Behura, A. K. (2023). Philosophy of Sports: Analyzing Sports Effects for Leadership Excellence. *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research*.

Our research approach : Exploring the career “boost”* offered by participation in sports and physical activity

Our research set out to validate the existence of a career “boost” for women provided by intensive sports participation as a result of psychological and social benefits realized from athletics.

We also sought to contextualize this “boost” and illustrate the specific benefits provided by sports that enable women to overcome systemic barriers to representation in leadership positions.

*The concept and term ‘career boost’ is drawn from the construct “legitimacy boost” introduced by PhD candidate Laura Nashman at the University of Victoria. The “legitimacy boost” refers to the impact sports has in strengthening the perceived legitimacy of female leaders. It will be further explored in her forthcoming (2025) dissertation.



Research methodology

This research was conducted through a voluntary survey completed by Canadian women in leadership. The survey included questions about participation in sport, perceived benefits gained from participation in sport, and self-identification demographic questions.

Areas of focus within this study

Validating the career “boost” provided by sports participation

Psychological benefits to women of participation in sport

Social benefits of women’s participation in sport

Impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on sports participation

Survey participants

We collected 266 survey responses from Canadian women in leadership roles. Participants were employed in a range of industries across the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors.



82.2%

of respondents had participated in sports or physical activity in a sustained and consistent manner over the course of their life.



69.9%

of respondents indicated that their most intensive participation period in sports or physical activity lasted 2 or more years.

Participants by Role

53.5% of participants were senior executives including C-Suite, firm Partners, Deputy Ministers, and company owners.

28.2% of participants were at the senior management level including Directors and Senior Managers - one level below senior executives.

Participants by Industry

43.3% of participants were from the professional, scientific, and technical services industry.

16.4% of participants were from the financial and insurance sector.

Professional, scientific, and technical services 43.3%

Finance & Insurance 16.4%

13.5%

8.8%

5.8%

4.1%

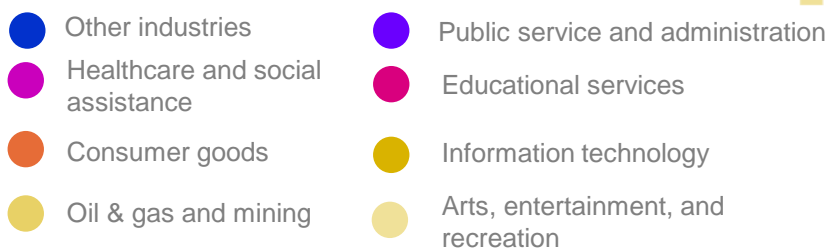
3.5%

2.4%

1.2%

1.2%

Remaining participants were from “other” industries, public service, healthcare, education, consumer goods, IT, oil and gas/energy, and the arts and entertainment sector.



Summary of findings

This study validated the overall benefits of sports and athletic participation, and supported the existence of a career “boost” for women, through several key findings.

Women in senior executive positions were most likely to be currently participating in sports. Those in senior or middle management were likely to have participated in sports at a previous time in their lives, but no longer identify as athletes.

This finding highlights the importance of programs and policies that enable women to continue participating in sports throughout their lifetime. Additionally, it highlights the importance of reducing other barriers to sports participation in adulthood, including disproportionate division of household labour and childcare duties.

Key benefits resulting from sports and athletic participation include resilience, discipline, and confidence in one’s abilities.

Throughout their careers, women encounter challenges, such as biased perceptions, difficulties in securing mentorship and sponsorship, and the complexities of navigating male-dominated environments. The cultivation of resilience, discipline, and self-confidence appear to constitute part of the “boost” that propels women with sports backgrounds forward in their careers. With these traits, women may be better equipped to overcome barriers and seize opportunities, ultimately enhancing their professional trajectories.

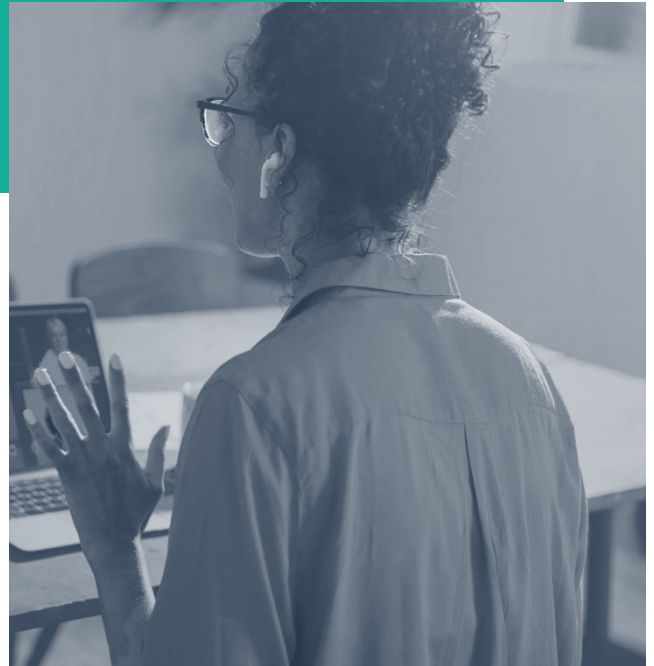
Additional benefits from continued sports participation into adulthood include increased stamina and energy for work.

Senior executive women and women who identified as current athletes were more likely to experience this benefit of sports participation, suggesting that sports may be a viable method to develop the physical and mental stamina required for roles at the highest levels of leadership.



The career “boost” driven by sports participation may help propel women to senior executive roles.

While women may leave sports as they advance in their careers, women who continue to participate in sports are more strongly represented at the senior executive level.



68.9%

of senior executive participants agreed that experience in sports gave them a career advantage over women without experience in sports - 17.8% indicated they “strongly agreed” with this statement.

Identification as an Athlete

Women at the senior executive level were the most likely to identify strongly as a “current athlete”.

Women in the middle management category were the most likely to have ended their participation in sports and identify as a “former athlete”.

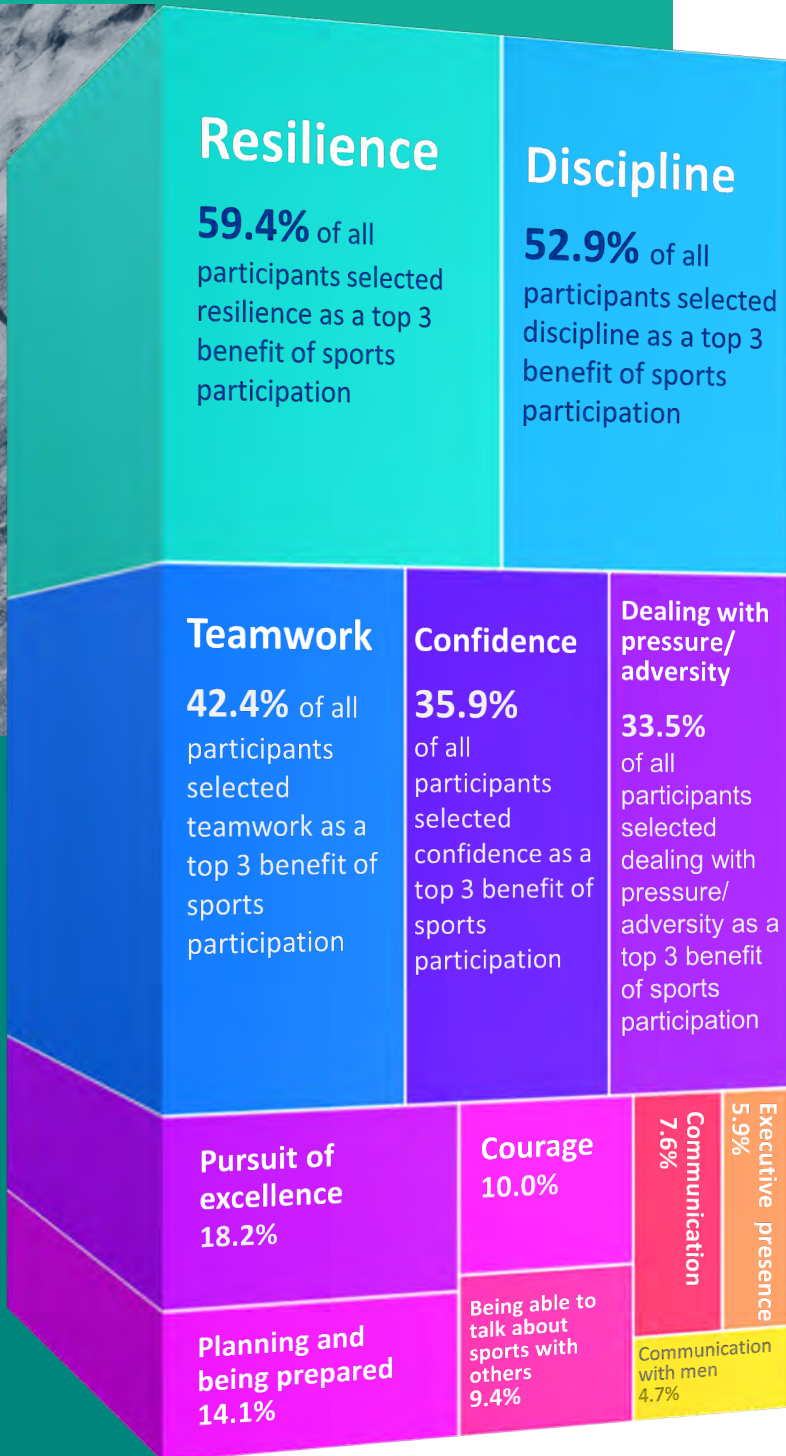
Senior executive	17.8% Strongly identify as a current athlete	13.3% Strongly identify as a former athlete
Senior management	8.7% Strongly identify as a current athlete	19.6% Strongly identify as a former athlete
Middle management	9.5% Strongly identify as a current athlete	38.1% Strongly identify as a former athlete
Entry-level	16.7% Strongly identify as a current athlete	16.7% Strongly identify as a former athlete

The career “boost” includes a combination of resilience, discipline, teamwork ability, and confidence enabled by sports participation.



Participants were asked to select the top 3 benefits gained as a result of participation in sports.

Participants across employee levels selected **resilience, discipline, teamwork, confidence, and dealing with pressure and adversity** as their top characteristics gained from sports.



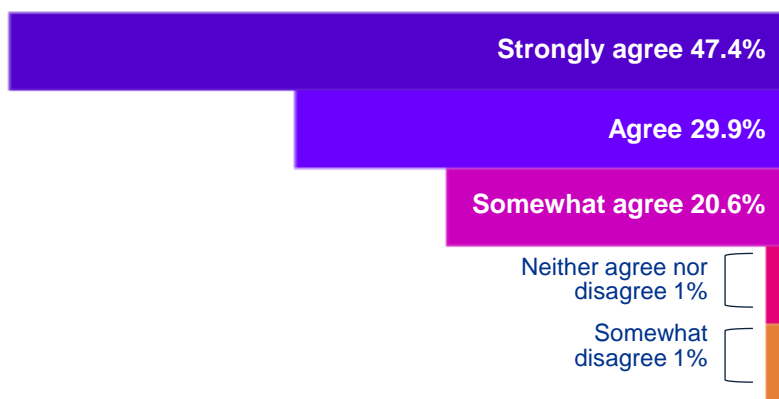
Increased self-confidence is a key outcome of sports participation for women

Research indicates that women tend to display weaker self-confidence and greater self-consciousness when compared to men from an early age. Sports may serve as an antidote to this.

Participants who identified as “current athletes” agreed that sports had given them greater confidence in their abilities.

Sports have given me confidence in my abilities

Current athletes



97.9%

of current athletes agree that sports have given them confidence in their abilities.

47.4%

of current athletes strongly agreed with this statement.

Participants whose most intensive period of sports activity lasted 2+ years agreed that sports had given them greater confidence in their abilities.

92.0%

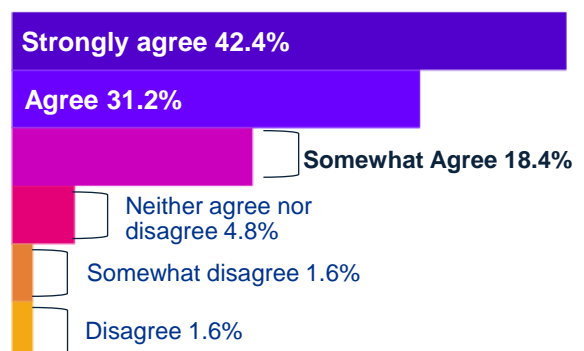
of athletes with 2+ years of intensive sports experience agreed to some extent that sports had given them confidence in their abilities.

42.4%

of athletes with 2+ years of intensive sports experience strongly agreed with this belief.

Sports have given me confidence in my abilities

Athletes with 2+ years of intensive experience



The confidence instilled by sports may impact women's executive presence or ways of "showing up" in leadership positions

Executive presence refers to the combination of qualities, behaviors, and characteristics that inspire confidence in one's leadership and abilities. It is often characterized by the ability to command respect, inspire trust, and influence others.



Senior executives who also identified as current athletes were considerably more likely than the average participant to state that sports had given them more executive presence.

Sports have given me more executive presence

Senior executives	Senior executives who are current athletes	Current athletes overall
27.8% Strongly agree	41.2% Strongly agree	28.9% Strongly agree
65.6% Agree to some extent	76.4% Agree to some extent	72.5% Agree to some extent

A critical component of the “boost” may be the stamina and energy enabled by sports participation that is required for leadership roles

Sports have given me more stamina and energy for my work

Current athletes

51.0%

Strongly agree

95.9%

Agree to some extent

Senior executives

40.0%

Strongly agree

91.1%

Agree to some extent

All participants

33.7%

Strongly agree

90.6%

Agree to some extent

Current athletes at all levels and Senior executives were more likely to “strongly agree” with the statement that sports have contributed to increased stamina and energy for work. This suggests that the stamina required for leadership roles may be built through similarly demanding activities outside of the workplace, such as sports and physical activity.



The benefits of sports participation build a strong case for improving the accessibility of sports for women and girls across demographic backgrounds

While participation in sports is often impeded by financial constraints, cultural and social norms may act as additional barriers for women and girls, contributing to the higher dropout rate from sports for women compared to men.

Women from middle and lower-income groups, as well as women of colour, reported considerably lower rates of consistent participation in sports over their life, indicating that the benefits of sports participation are not equitably distributed.



I have been involved in sports in a sustained and consistent manner over the course of most of my life



of participants from upper-income families strongly agreed with this statement.



of participants who self-identified as White strongly agreed with this statement.



of participants from middle/lower-income families strongly agreed with this statement.



of participants who self-identified as a person of colour strongly agreed with this statement.

Conclusion

This study validated the existence of the career “boost” provided by sports for women in leadership roles. This was illustrated by the specific components of the boost such as resilience, discipline, confidence, and other qualities that contribute to stronger executive presence in women.

The considerable benefits offered by sports provide insights into a potential avenue through which communities, educational institutions, sports organizations, and workplaces can contribute to women’s equity and representation in leadership roles.

The findings from this study highlight the need for sports policy and community development activities to prioritize accessibility and promote participation by women and girls of all socioeconomic backgrounds and abilities. Examples include:

- Recreational programs for girls such as camps and social clubs incorporating intensive sports or athletics into their programming.
- Schools providing inclusive programs and opportunities for girls to participate and stay engaged in sports and physical education – including opportunities such as single-sex teams and co-ed teams with allocated space for girls.
- Workplaces tailoring professional development programs for women to cultivate the same characteristics developed through sports such as resilience, discipline, and confidence, which have a demonstrated link to leadership and career advancement.