Youth Friendliness of Non-Profit Boards Checklist

This checklist examines the accessibility and friendliness of Board of Directors, for youth members and youth involvement, in non-profit organizations. It is funded in part by the RBC Financial Group and is one of several activities that have been developed in conjunction with the **Youth Alliance Project (YAP)**, an initiative of the **Metropolitan Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children's (METRAC)**. Funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, the YAP seeks to make schools and communities safer for young women. The YAP is a youth-driven collective focused on issues of violence against women and girls, working to strengthen the capacities of youth to advocate for improvements to our city's existing approaches to addressing this form of violence. METRAC is a not-for-profit, community-based organization that works to prevent and end violence against diverse women, youth, and children.

The issues covered in this checklist are essential for boards to consider if they want to foster and nurture authentic youth leadership, as well as harness the power adults have to support youth to become the next generation of leaders. The checklist's content is based on findings from an online survey conducted with 54 youth and adults to determine the youth-friendliness of non-profit boards and what should be done to make them more youth-friendly. It has been created from a perspective that is mindful of the realities of **gender-based violence** against girls and women and issues of social **oppression** in general (e.g. racism, **adultism**, **sexism**, heterosexism, classism).

According to Laidlaw Foundation's *Youth as Decision Makers: Strategies for Youth Engagement in Governance and Decision-Making in Recreation* summary report, there are several reasons for and benefits of youth involvement.

- Youth are affected by the organization, and they have the right to have a say in the organization's function and programming.
- By being engaged in decision-making, youth can develop important social and leadership skills.
- Youth offer a unique perspective and capability, and they can also enhance programming geared towards other youth.
- The organization's capacity to make good decisions and wise investments in programs and services related to youth can be strengthened by youth engagement.
- Youth engagement can lead to reduced conflict and mistrust through improved understanding of youth and reduced negative stereotyping. Youth are equipped to become more active members and citizens in their community.

Please list below the unique benefits of diverse youth involvement in your board and organization:

Policy Questions

1. Do you have board policies that may restrict the full inclusion of younger people?

   ☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Maybe

   If "yes" or "maybe", what are they?

2. Do you have board policies that may restrict the full inclusion of young women in particular?

   ☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Maybe

   If "yes" or "maybe", what are they?

It is important to correct policies that prevent younger people, including young women, from having decision-making power and opportunities on boards, or youth will be discouraged from joining in the first place. Policies may not intentionally shut youth and/or young women out, but they could do so in practice – in other words, they could create systemic **discrimination** against younger people. Many times, this discrimination in organizations impacts young women all the more, as they have less **power** than young men do.

This includes policies that restrict people under a certain age from joining boards, create an expectation of financial contribution from all board members, as well as policies that restrict the voting rights of younger people. Remember, full youth inclusion means that youth are actively involved in decision making and not merely given "advisory" roles with little or no real decision-making power.

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3. Do you have board policies that openly encourage youth to join and participate?

   ☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Maybe

   If "yes" or "maybe", what are they?

   Which ones, if any, encourage young women in particular to join and participate?

Boards should have policies that actively, thoughtfully, and purposefully encourage youth participation. The involvement shouldn't be tokenizing. Policies could include reserving two or more dedicated seats for youth board members and mandating tailored orientation for younger members so they can fully understand what being a board member entails. It's important that these policies address the specific needs and realities of young women and young men, as well as the needs and realities of marginalized youth in general – consider, for instance, reserving a seat for at least one young woman to ensure representation.

4. Are your qualifications/requirements for board positions different for youth?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If "yes", how are they different?

To value to insight and knowledge that youth bring to the table, different, more inclusive qualifications should be outlined for both youth applicants to the board and youth board members who would like to take on specific roles on the board. These qualifications should value the kinds of experience, skills, and expertise that diverse youth – including young women – are more likely to have, and interview questions should seek to tease those things out (e.g. a young woman who babysits her younger siblings while her parents work late shifts may have strong organizational and multitasking skills as well as a solid understanding of children's issues).

Outreach Questions

1. How often does your board/organization specifically engage in initiatives to recruit youth to its board of directors (rate from 1 to 5)?

1	2	3	4	5
(never)				(often)

Do these initiatives make special effort to reach out to young women?

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not sure

Many youth may not know enough about what boards are and why they should join them. It is important to make continual and understandable efforts to recruit them so that they'll know these opportunities exist. It is particularly important to make efforts to recruit youth of diverse identities (e.g. gender, language, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability) representing diverse neighbourhoods (e.g. suburb areas, rural areas, urban areas).

2. If you do actively recruit youth, how do you do it (choose all that apply)?

☐ Try to meet with them in person (e.g. go to youth drop-in centres in malls, high schools)
☐ Post notice on your website or in paper-based publications
☐ Fax out notices to places youth may frequent
☐ Use other online mechanisms (e.g. Facebook, My Space)
☐ Work with people from your own organization and other organizations who work with youth to make the opportunity available (e.g. teachers, youth workers, peer youth leaders)
☐ Other:

No one or two methods of getting the word out will be as effective as they could be. As many strategies as possible need to be utilized, and the opportunity to join a board has to be made available to youth in places they go to, such as service centers, community centers, and educational institutions. Youth should not be expected to come to you – you need to go to them and use plain, accessible language to explain what boards are and why they should be interested in joining.

3. Do you dedicate adequate financial and human resources to the outreach and recruitment of youth (rate from 1 to 5)?

1	2	3	4	5
(not enough)				(enough)

While recruitment doesn't have to use up a lot of resources, it does require some dedicated people power, money, and time to do well. Resources are especially important to dedicate towards recruiting youth who traditionally have less access and who have been under-reached, including young women, youth of colour, youth living with disabilities, and low income youth.

Practice Questions

1. Do you provide training for new youth board members to help them understand issues of governance, decision-making, civic engagement, the realities of the non-profit sector, and other related issues?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If "yes", on what subject areas does the training focus?

2. Do you provide any tailored training for young women and young men/adult men as allies?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Youth may need more extensive training than adult board members, especially if youth members don't have prior experience on a board. The training process should be tailored to their stated needs and be carried out with an **anti-oppression analysis** or perspective – it should also be interactive and make every effort to clarify processes, practices, and structures that experienced board members may take for granted (e.g. approval processes for minutes, the purpose of an annual general meeting). The training should address how boards make a true impact upon the overall functioning of the organization, what impact they have on the non-profit sector in general, and the rights and responsibilities of board members. Youth board members should also be given the chance to meet with volunteers and staff members to get more familiar with the organization's work.

In addition, training should be provided for members working in mixed gender boards. In many mixed gender spaces, women are often silent as men "take up space" and do the majority of decision-making and discussion. This dynamic can be made all the more stark for young women working with young men and adult men. Male board members need training on how to be **allies** to women and girls, and all board members need training on how to work together to create an equitable board dynamic.

3. Do you provide training for existing adult board members on how they can make the board more youth friendly?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If "yes", on what subject areas does the training focus?

Adult board members must be prepared to make room and make changes for real youth participation. They may need extensive training to understand why it's important and how to do it. This element should not be left to chance, or youth members who do join may feel alienated, out of place, and unsupported. All training should be done from an anti-oppression perspective, and issues of **adultism** in society and within organizations are important to be explained, discussed, and processed. This will help to challenge any resistance to meaningful youth engagement and leadership on boards.

4. Are effective mentorship initiatives in place to ensure a transfer of knowledge and support for younger board members, particularly those with less board experience?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If "yes", what exactly?

Adult mentorship is very important for youth, and in the mentoring process, adults can learn many essential skills as well. The desire for mentorship needs to be backed up by appropriate policies, and how to mentor should be a focus of training for more experienced board members. Mentorship initiatives can include a "buddy" support system between an adult mentor and a youth board member.

5. How youth-accessible are your board meetings with respect to:

   a. Language used in materials and in discussions

   1   2   3   4   5
   (not accessible)   (very accessible)

   b. Meeting locations:

   1   2   3   4   5
   (not accessible)   (very accessible)

   c. Meeting times:

   1   2   3   4   5
   (not accessible)   (very accessible)

   d. Overall openness/preparedness for contributions of younger board members:

   1   2   3   4   5
   (not accessible)   (very accessible)

Many board meetings are held at times and at locations that are not accessible to youth, particularly marginalized youth; for example those who:

- do not live in the downtown core and use public transportation
- have children or younger siblings to babysit
- have restrictive curfews and/or may not feel safe getting home late at night by themselves
- do not have much money

The specific needs of youth board members with respect to these logistical limitations must be taken seriously and must be carefully addressed. For example, resources should be put aside for youth travel and childcare expenses, and board meeting locations should be flexible and easy for youth to access (e.g. hold meetings in neighbourhood library or community centre as opposed to a space downtown; hold meetings earlier in the afternoon). Up front attention paid to such logistical concerns will contribute to an overall board atmosphere that truly values and is prepared for youth involvement, including young women's involvement.

In addition, every effort should be made to ensure meetings themselves are accessible in terms of language and atmosphere. An agenda item seeking feedback on these issues from both youth and adult board members should be included every meeting, and more detailed evaluations on the process of making the board more youth friendly should be conducted with all members periodically.

Some Resources on Enhancing Youth Friendliness

- Youth Alliance Project resources and literature review (available soon at www.metrac.org)
- *InvolveYouth: A Guide to Involving Youth in Decision-Making* (http://www.toronto.ca/involveyouth/index2.htm)
- *InvolveYouth 2: A Guide to Meaningful Youth Engagement* (http://www.toronto.ca/involveyouth/youth2.htm)
- *Youth as Decision Makers: Strategies for Youth Engagement in Governance and Decision-Making in Recreation* and *Self Evaluation Check List for Organizations* (http://laidlawfdn.org/cms/page1423.cfm)

Select Glossary of Terms

Please note that this is not a complete glossary; it's just a short list of some terms used in this checklist. All definitions are taken from materials written by Respect in Action (ReAct), METRAC's peer youth violence prevention program, unless otherwise noted.

Adultism: discrimination against youth because of their age. Examples: not being able to vote in Canada till the age of 18; youth being kicked out of store when there's more than two of them. (From *End the Silence: A Zine for Youth, By Youth*, by ReAct.)

Ally: although they may not personally face a particular barrier, discrimination or oppression, an ally stands up, supports, and challenges themselves and others about the oppression that someone else or another group faces. (From *Being an Ally and Definitions* fact sheet, by ReAct.)

Anti-oppression analysis: a term to describe an understanding of power dynamics in the world, looking at who holds power and privilege and who is kept from it through various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, heterosexism). Such an analysis understands that the world and its institutions and systems are constructed to keep dominant groups in power and shut out marginalized groups. Employing this analysis involves challenging systems of dominance and looking for solutions to make society more equitable. (From *Volunteer Orientation Manual: January 2008*, by METRAC).

Discrimination: behaviour, policies, and practices that cause unfair treatment of people, based on the group they're part of (e.g. age, race, gender). Examples: going for an interview but you can't get in the building because it's not wheelchair accessible; your parent getting mad at you because your girlfriend is a Person of Colour. (From *End the Silence: A Zine for Youth, By Youth*, by ReAct.)

Gender-based violence: happens because women and girls don't always get the respect and rights they deserve in our society. It's a result of sexism (mistreatment of, power over, and discrimination against women and girls because of their gender), in society and between individual people. Violence against women and girls comes in many different forms, including emotional, physical, sexual, financial, and spiritual forms of violence. (From *Violence Against Women and Girls* fact sheet, by ReAct.)

Oppression: the fact that some people have more power than others leads to oppression. It happens when people with less power are shut up, ignored, shut out, and looked down on. Oppression comes in many forms, like sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, fatphobia, adultism, transphobia, and xenophobia. (From *End the Silence: A Zine for Youth, By Youth*, by ReAct. Definitions of the various types of oppression listed above are also available in the zine.)

Power: rights and advantages some people have and other people can't get. Examples: students with money can afford university or college but others can't; male students usually aren't afraid of sexual assault when walking home from class, but female students often have to deal with this fear. (From *End the Silence: A Zine for Youth, By Youth*, by ReAct.)

Sexism: unfair treatment and exploitation of women based on the idea that men are better than women. Examples: Most literature you read in English classes is written by men, for men; being expected to do more chores than your brother does. (From *End the Silence: A Zine for Youth, By Youth*, by ReAct.)