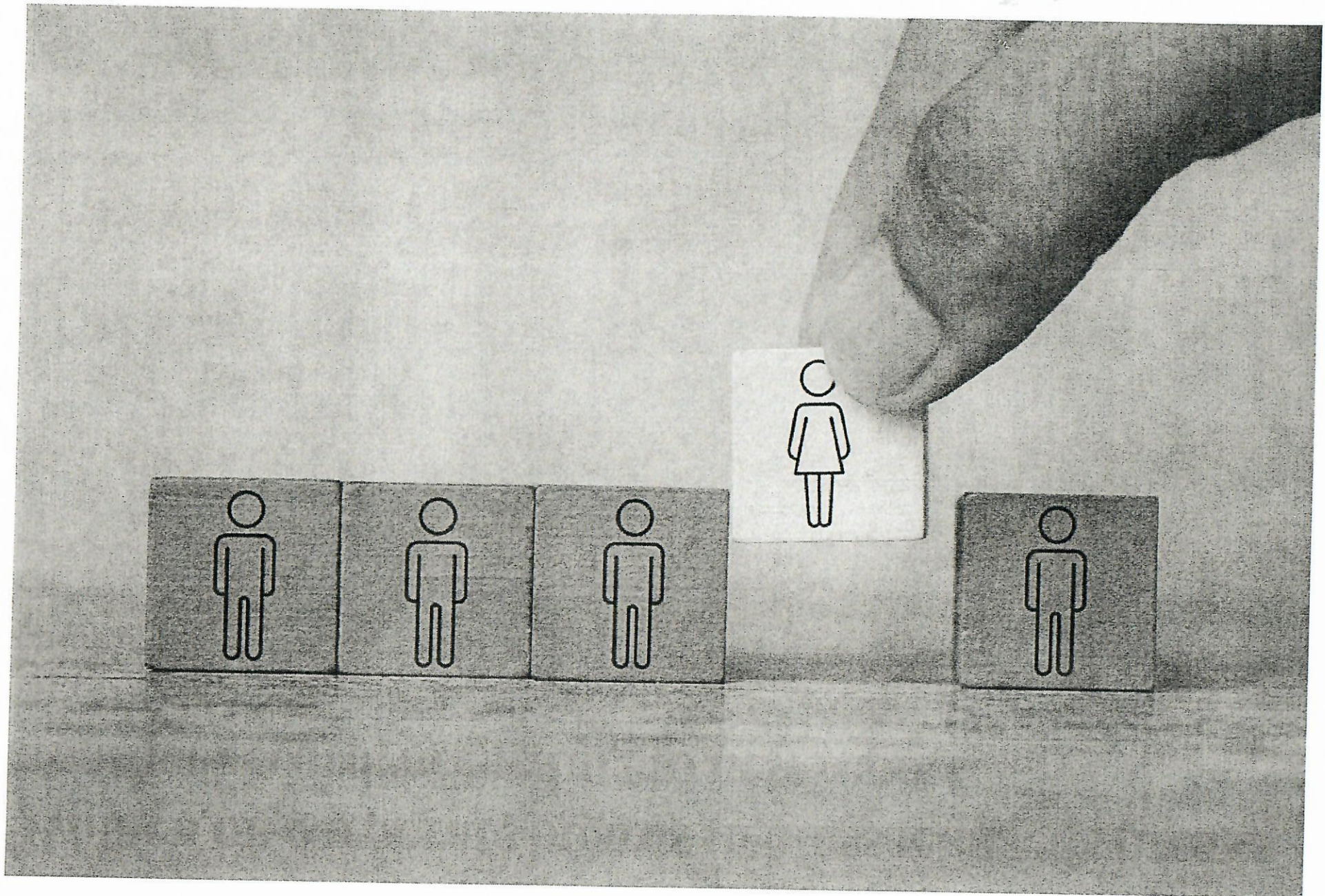


Women on corporate boards in Massachusetts breaks another record, according to new report

By Shirley Leung Globe Columnist, Updated November 15, 2022, 7:29 a.m.



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After 20 years of tracking women on the boards of Massachusetts's biggest public companies, neither Patricia Flynn nor Toni Wolfman can remember who came up with the idea. But they knew it was a good one, and they jumped at the chance to work on the project for The Boston Club.

Back then, there wasn't a lot of data on board diversity nor was it much of a priority for corporate America, all of which made the nonprofit Boston Club's work that much more important. Flynn and Wolfman knew companies were woefully behind, but even they were surprised at what they found in their first annual census, which also examined the number of women in executive suites.

Of the state's 100 biggest public companies, women occupied only 9 percent of board seats in 2003. Not only that, 50 companies had all-male boards. The Boston Club, a group that advances women leaders, also came up with another ignominious distinction for corporate laggards: the "zero-zero." These are the companies that have no women on their boards and no women in senior management. There were 35 of them in 2003.

For Flynn and Wolfman, their patience was about to be put to the test.

"That first decade it was so depressing, so little progress, nothing," recalled Flynn, a professor of economics and management at Bentley University.

But the data began to change dramatically in recent years, brought on by social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Me Too that put pressure on companies to diversify the workforce, especially at the very top.

The latest census, out on Tuesday, reflects how far we have come. The Boston Club reports that women account for 29.6 percent of board seats — surpassing last year's record high. There is only one Massachusetts company (Global Partners of Waltham, remember that name) that has an all-male board.

This year's report represents a milestone for another reason: It will be the last one put together by Flynn and Wolfman, who have diligently analyzed the data all these years. Flynn, 71, is retiring next June after nearly a half century at Bentley, where she also served as the dean of the business school for a decade. Wolfman, 80, retired as an active partner of Foley Hoag in 2003, and now she's ready to begin a real retirement.

"It was a big time sink. There were bumps along the way, headaches, this went wrong that went wrong," said Wolfman. "But at the end of the day, I'm proud of the product, and more pleased with the progress that the companies have shown."



Patricia Flynn (left), a professor at Bentley University, and Toni Wolfman, a retired law partner, have been the co-authors of the Boston Census for 20 years. They are retiring from the project and reflect on the progress made tracking women on boards and in executive suites. SUSAN R. SYMONDS

Flynn said she's also proud of the work, and she couldn't imagine doing the report without Wolfman. It seemed like a good time for both to step aside.

"We've been working together for 20 years. It has been fabulous," said Flynn. "It has been a good project, and I think it has been a worthwhile use of our time."

This year's report highlights another positive trend: Tokenism is out. In 2003, close to a third of the companies had one woman director, 15 had two women directors, and only four had three or more woman directors. In 2022, the majority of companies had three or more women on their boards, while only six companies had a lone woman board director and a third had two women directors.

Here are some other numbers from this year's census that Flynn and Wolfman like: 88 companies report having both gender and racial/ethnic diversity on their boards, while 15 companies indicate that women and people of color constitute the majority of their board members.

"Those are really pretty significant numbers," observed Wolfman. "Are we satisfied? You're never satisfied until there's parity, but we're getting there."

In the years I've covered The Boston Club census, I've been struck by the "zero-zero" designation. For only two years — 2020 and 2021 — there were no zero-zeroes. This year, Global Partners, a major oil distributor, broke the streak with an all-male board and no women among executive officers listed in its proxy statement and annual report filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

in a statement, the company said that women are part of its 11-member executive leadership team, including its chief people officer and chief information officer. There are no women directors after chief financial officer Daphne Foster retired and left the board in September 2021, but the company says it is actively working to diversify its board.

“We recognize our industry is far too homogenous, and we know we have to do more to change the face of energy,” according to Catie Kerns, Global Partners’s senior vice president of corporate affairs and sustainability.

Beyond social movements, Flynn and Wolfman give credit to institutional investors, who as shareholders of public companies can demand change. Having women and people of color matters because a growing body of research indicates that companies with diverse leaders generate higher profits. They credit socially responsible firms, such as Trillium Asset Management and Boston Trust Walden, with being out front more than a decade ago, before massive investors such as State Street and BlackRock made board diversity a priority.

They also give a shout-out to former and current state treasurers — Steve Grossman and Deb Goldberg (in Massachusetts) and Denise Nappier (in Connecticut) — who have led by example in pushing companies in the pension fund to have diversity on their boards.


I’d like to add one more reason why we’ve seen women make so many strides in Massachusetts: The Boston Club’s annual census.

We all know what gets measured, gets done. For 20 years, Flynn and Wolfman have done the unglamorous work of poring over corporate filings to hold companies accountable.

What’s next for the census remains to be seen, but what I know for sure is that Flynn and Wolfman have played a pivotal role in advancing women in the workplace. Parity of power, not long ago a workplace aspiration, is now within

reach

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