

Across health care boardrooms, that's Madam Chairman to you

By [Shirley Leung](#)

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In health care boardrooms across Massachusetts, you're starting to hear something that has a nice ring to it: Madam Chairman.

Nearly a third of our hospital boards are now helmed by women, and for the first time, the two biggest health insurers in this state, Blue Cross Blue Shield and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, have women chairing their boards.

Phyllis Yale, a well-known health care consultant from Bain & Co., will preside over her first full board meeting at Blue Cross Wednesday, while Mary Ann Tocio, the president and chief operating officer of Bright Horizons, was put in charge of Harvard Pilgrim's directors last week.

How rare is this in the business world? Only three percent of Fortune 500 companies have female board chairs.

Women are shattering the glass ceiling in health care, so boys, watch out for the shards. We're just getting started.

The most visible part of this transformation has been in the corner office at hospitals, where 21 women serve as president or CEO, from [Betsy Nabel](#) at Brigham and Women's to [Kate Walsh](#) at Boston Medical Center. That represents a quarter of the medical institutions in this state.

If it seems like the heels are beating the wing tips every time there's an opening at the top, you're not imagining things. Two weeks ago, Lahey Hospital named [Joanne Mather Conroy](#) its new chief executive.

Hospital CEOs typically are plucked from the ranks of chief operating officers, chief financial officers, or chief nursing officers, says Lynn Nicholas, the CEO of the Massachusetts Hospital Association.

So consider these stats from her members: half of the chief operating officers are women; a third of the chief financial officers are women, and more than 90 percent of top nursing jobs are held by women.

Health care staffs traditionally have been dominated by us -- think of nurses and therapists. It's a sector that attracts women because they thrive in caregiver roles, but

also because the industry offers family-friendly flexible shifts and schedules. With a big female base, that means more gals have a shot at moving into the ranks of management.

But that alone doesn't explain it for me. It goes back to the boardroom and the tone set from the top. Though technically classified as nonprofits, most healthcare organizations are run like corporations, except when it comes to building their boards. That's where they act more like a typical nonprofit -- such as an educational charity -- and load up on female directors.

Take for example, our major health insurers. Women hold five of the 14 seats on the Blue Cross board, and they make up five of the 12 members of the Harvard Pilgrim board. At Tufts Health Plan, women occupy three --soon to be four -- of 11 board slots. Female directors in all these organizations also chair key committees.

Contrast that to Corporate America where the guys high-five each other when they allow one or two high-powered chicks in the boardroom.

For Blue Cross CEO Andrew Dreyfus, having women in senior posts helps the organization understand its customers.

"Who makes the decision on health care in families? It's almost always women," said Dreyfus.

Harvard Pilgrim CEO Eric Schultz calls women the "CFO" of households, or "the chief family officer."

Having female executives in large numbers both in and outside the boardroom is about making sure the insurer's leadership reflects not only its customers, but also its employees, which are about 70 percent women.

Said Schultz: "It's a no brainer for us."

As it should be for Corporate America.

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