



## "Figures on the table" a gender profile of the Dutch Building sector

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How can the Dutch building sector make better use of female professionals interested in or already working in leading positions? To answer this question, the Bouwnetwerk ([www.bouwnetwerk.net](http://www.bouwnetwerk.net)) initiated research into the status quo and experiences of women architects, developers, engineers and others involved in building and urbanism. The development of appropriate strategies to enhance the position of women begins with basic knowledge of the current position of women in this branch of economy and governance. After a preliminary inventory, Bouwnetwerk (BNW) concluded that very little knowledge is available. Yet the profession itself is at stake here: the asymmetrical composition of its workforce including the top positions, leads to the loss of talent, expertise and capacity for innovation. The building sector lags behind other branches in terms of participation of women in leading positions. For this reason, BNW initiated a project to demonstrate the following:

1. current participation of women in leading positions in the building sector
2. major opportunities and threats to upward mobility for these women
3. the visibility and influence of women in the building sector

The project consisted of 3 parts, which are separately summarized below:

### 1. Quantitative: the statistics

An inventory was performed by VHTO (knowledge centre for women in technology, [www.VHTO.nl](http://www.VHTO.nl)) and concentrated on official databases such as CBS (Central Bureau for Statistics), EIB (Institute for Building Economics), CFI & VSNU (pension and labour organisations). VHTO came to the following conclusions:

1. registration of personnel hardly ever makes a distinction on grounds of gender. Either the ratio of men to women is not available in the statistics, or the numbers of women are so small that they do not show up in statistics
2. monitoring of development of the number of female professionals is virtually impossible as a result, with the exception of staff on site ([www.vrouwindebouw.nl](http://www.vrouwindebouw.nl))
3. for decades, women have constituted an average of around 30% of all students in architecture and other building-related studies at university, polytechnic or academy. This potential forms a sad contrast to the percentage of women in leading positions; most sectors of building-related professions do not have more than 5% female participation at the top
4. in the building trade, only 1.8% of management positions are occupied by women, mainly as director.

The Netherlands lags well behind other countries when it comes to the number of women in top functions in scientific and technical fields.

## 2. The experiences of female professionals

YM de Boer Consultancy ([www.ymdeboeradvies](http://www.ymdeboeradvies)) carried out an online questionnaire among more than 300 professional women, who were approached via BNW and its contacts. All participants are independent qualified professionals, often in influential positions and representative of the target group.

The vast majority cite 'interesting work' as their leading motivation.

The second important factor is 'personal development and growth'.

The participants further indicated that:

- 33% combine job with voluntary work or board membership
- 27% have care responsibilities alongside their work
- 45% is of the opinion that such activities influence career opportunities
- 44% state that men have an advantage over women in their career progression, whereby 33% indicate that this advantage was 'hidden'. 47% state that they have not experienced gender differences
- 40% experience a difference in financial compensation between men and women

Key factors for success as seen by participants were:

Experience, seizing opportunities and networking.

Perceived obstacles:

Lack of assertiveness, inadequate network, letting opportunities lie.

The advice given by participants for improving career opportunities for women is most often related to ways of facilitating the combination of work and care; also mentioned are better career advice for women and encouraging a change in the culture of firms and institutions in the building sector.

## 3. Qualitative: the face (M/F) of the building sector

Tussen Ruimte ([www.tussen-ruimte.nl](http://www.tussen-ruimte.nl)) constructed a quick scan of leading firms, institutions and town councils, based on the 'market leaders' listed in Building Business 2005. As a result, the scan covers a relatively small number of people, whose influence is great in the sector.

The scan demonstrated the following:

- the highest visibility and presence of women can be found in the public sector, especially among town councillors and other elected representatives. In the civil service, however, there are very few women in top functions.
- housing corporations show a similar pattern: a reasonable percentage of female board members (as a result of explicit national policy) but very few executive directors.
- the top 10 architectural firms have no more than 10% female directors, partners and associates
- the top 10 building contractors have no female board members at all.
- there are no women at the top of leading technical consultancies and very few in engineering firms: 1 board member and 1 director.
- at the bottom position in terms of the participation of women are the knowledge and property sectors.

The scan also indicates that the visibility of women as opinion leader or professional authority is far less than the factual input of women.

This hypothesis should be tested by monitoring the number of women speaking at symposia, contributing to trade publications, being interviewed etc. over a longer period of time.

## Conclusions: the potential

Comparison of the number of women in higher functions with the number of graduates shows that the building sector 'loses' 100 to 150 highly qualified women each year. A small number in itself, but the consequence is a considerably smaller pool of women available for top positions. In the context of the market leaders' profile, recruitment or retention of these women could make a significant difference. The potential of women would grow even further if the number of female students and graduates were raised to the same level as that of men.

BNW calls for a double strategy: recruitment of more women to the profession and better career monitoring and retention of those already working in the building sector. Using the experience already gained, a start can be made now to help prevent future graduates from dropping out of the sector.

The questionnaire confirmed that the same type of career difficulties exist for professional women in the building sector as elsewhere. The obstacles are however even more forcefully present and difficult to break with, as long as:

- women form a very small minority with little influence
- the image of the 'grey suit' sector persists
- women first need to prove themselves, while men are being offered opportunities on the basis of 'suspected' performance
- men are allowed to fail, women seldom get a second chance
- most women tend to play down their achievements and men tend to overlook women's talents
- women remain perfectionists in all their areas of responsibility, at work as well as at home.

In other sectors, organisations and firms with a mixture of men and women at the top have been proven to perform better and are more innovative. Investing in female talent in the building sector means an investment in innovation.

The BNW-PSIBouw report makes a large number of recommendations for branch institutions, trade unions, employer's organisations and policymakers to work towards at least 30% women at the top of each firm. BNW has instigated several joint initiatives and is keen to continue monitoring and collaboration to reach this goal.

For more information, see [www.bouwnetwerk.net](http://www.bouwnetwerk.net)

