

# Emancipation starts from the top: the role of the government in promoting diversity

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Policy memo

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## Emancipation starts from the top: the role of the government in promoting diversity

### KEY MESSAGES

- The number of women in top functions in the Netherlands is low. This is also the case in the Dutch bureaucracy where only 37 percent of top employees is female.
- The underlying reason for this is several gender biases against women
- It is important to improve the number of women in top positions because a bureaucracy that is representative is seen as more legitimate by the people.
- To improve the number of women the culture of the bureaucracy must be changed to give women an equal change.

### Introduction

The gender equality index, published its findings on the position of women within the European Union and within its member states in particular. In the Dutch context of employment, it showed that in some aspects such as career prospects and employment rate, the Dutch average was only slightly below the EU's total average. But in other cases, the difference between men and women on the labor market was still very profoundly present (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.). One of the areas that still lacks a proportional female representation is in the very top of important organizations both in the private sector and in the public sector. One important organization that lacks representation is the government bureaucracy, despite the government policies targeted to get more women in top positions with diversity quotas (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). Given these ambitions what else can the government do to improve the number of women in top positions, and why is it important that the government takes the lead role in this process?

This memo will explain why it is important that the government should give a better example in representing diversity within the governmental bureaucracy. It will do this with the help of the concept representative bureaucracy, to highlight why a diverse bureaucracy is not only an important example but also what advantages it has for the government itself. An important aspect to how to solve this is to look at the organizational culture as it can play a vital role in the promotion of woman. The structure of the memo is as follows. First the problem will be described more in depth, then the reason why this problem was selected and the purpose of this memo are explained. Third the findings of the scientific literature will be discussed and finally, the conclusions and recommendations will be presented.

### Problem description

Inequality between men and women has historically always been a problem. This is especially true in the case of job opportunities and they ability for women to getting to the top functions. In the case of the Netherlands, the numbers display a sever lack of representation in the top of major organizations. In 2019 only 15 percent of the top management at 5000 of the biggest companies were female (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). In the public sector, the numbers are for the most part better, however they remain relatively low. In the top of the non-profit sector, about 32 to 35 percent of the organizational top positions are filled by

women. In Dutch universities, diversity is much lower and of the professors only 23 percent of them was female in 2018. In the Dutch government the numbers are mostly the same. Political offices are an exception to this. In the house of representatives, 39 percent of the members was female in 2020, while in the senate 33 percent of the members were female in that same year. In the European parliament the number is the highest, where 42 percent of the Dutch representation is female (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS] & Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 2020, pp. 71–83).

Percentage of women in the top in each sector in the Netherlands

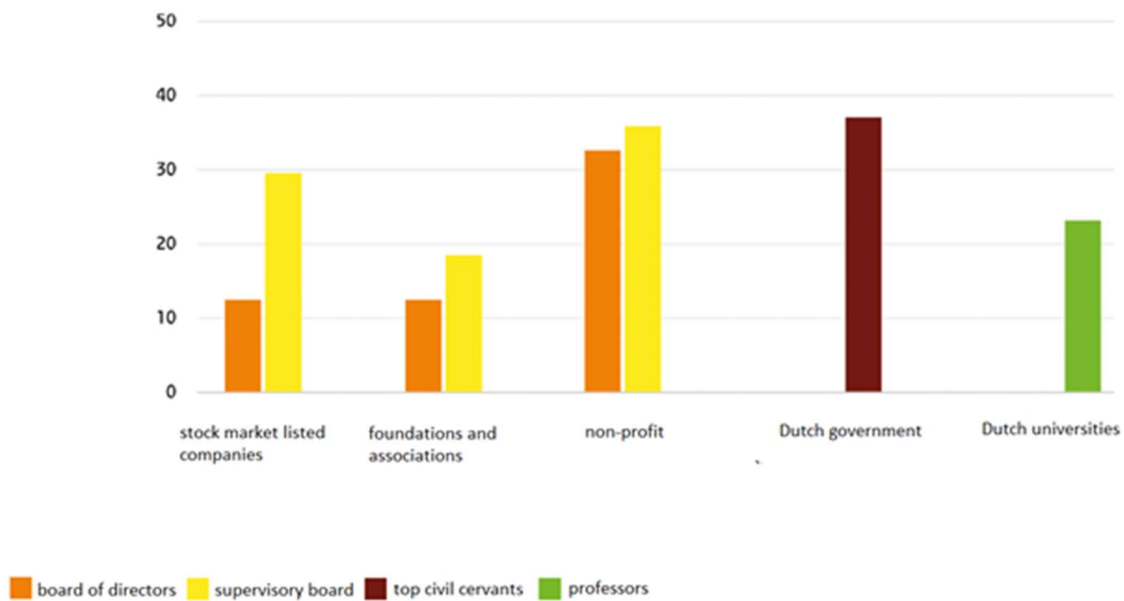


Figure 1: Reprinted from 'Emancipatiemonitor 2020', by Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek & Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau. (2020, December, 11). Retrieved from <https://digitaal.scp.nl/emancipatiemonitor2020/komen-er-meer-vrouwen-in-topfuncties/>. Table translated by Thomas van Mulbregt.

In the bureaucratic top, called the *Algemene Bestuursdienst* or the general administrative service, the number of women serving was just 20 percent in 2008 (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). This has over the past ten years grown to 36 percent in 2018, but has only grown by one percent to 37 percent in 2019 (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83). Although overall the number of female employees is increasing, it is still not a correct representation of the society it serves (van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011). The numbers of the previously mentioned public and private organizations are visualized in Figure 1 (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83). The percentage of women in top positions between 2012 and 2016 can be seen in Figure 2 (Groeneveld et al., 2019).

In an attempt to promote more diversity in these organizations in particular in the private sector the government instigates a diversity quota. This refers to legislation making it mandatory for the biggest companies to hire more women for top positions. It was the government's intention that at least 30 percent of the top positions in the private sector would be given to women. The government itself had this quota already, and was able to reach it earlier. In general, however, the quota has been largely ineffective. It led to only a small growth in the number of women in top functions in the private sector. The government wants to go further with the legislation making the quota more binding (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83). However there has been a lot of criticism on this policy. Some researchers have stated that a diversity quota is not a preverbal way to increase the number of women (NOS, 2020). On top of this, it has been shown that although the population is generally in favor of more diversity at the top, it is against the use of diversity quotas (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83).

Both the low numbers and the policy of diversity quotas show the core of this problem. The government has ambitions to increase the number of women in top positions, but is unable to realize this. It is even not completely realizing this in its own bureaucratic structures, even though the numbers do reach the targets set, it still remains a very low percentage of the total top officials. These aspects show that additional steps are necessary, to effectively reach its goals and which paves the way for even more ambitious goals.

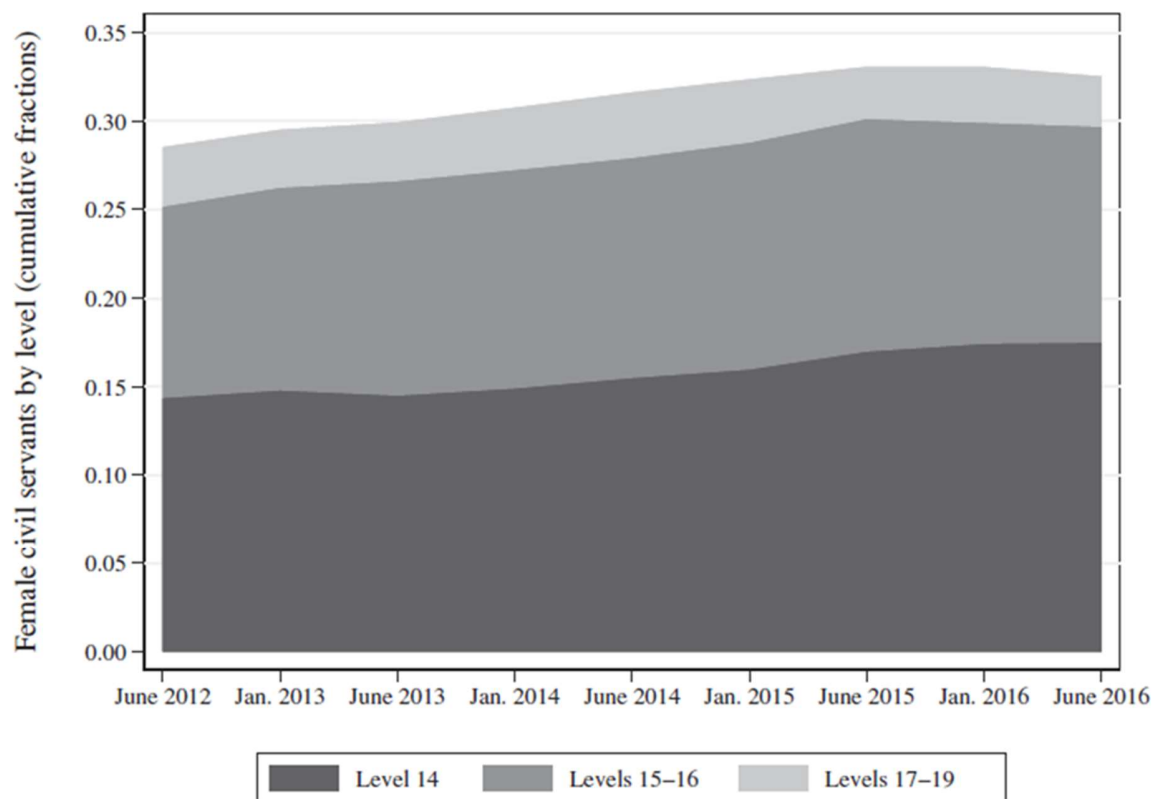


Figure 2: Reprinted from 'Breaking the glass ceiling, but facing a glass cliff? The role of organizational decline in women's representation in leadership positions in Dutch civil service organizations', by Groeneveld, S., Bakker, V., & Schmidt, E., 2019, *Public Administration*, 98(2), p. 448. In this table the civil service is divided in levels. Level 14 are considered middle managers, level 15 and 16 represent senior management and level 17-19 represent the top of the management class.

### Background and Purpose

The reason why this research is focused on the low rate of representation of women in the higher levels of the bureaucracy is because these low and slow growing numbers go against its own ambitions to get more women involved in high offices. As the old saying goes, change starts at home and therefore it is a good place to start to look why the government itself is not achieving an representative level of both male and female employees in its own institutions. Another reason is the governments use of diversity quotas in the private sector and they underwhelming results that this policy has produced. Because there are scientists that discourage the use of these quotas and prefer alternative roots, it is important to showcase what other roots can be taken (NOS, 2020).

The best place to display these alternative policies is within the government's own structures. It is also important to focus on the top of the bureaucratic structures because there is usually a lot of attention on these levels and they show a powerful emancipatory message, as the higher functions are fairly represented. If there were more women in these positions it can set a good example for lower levels to get more diverse. The reasoning here is that if the government itself is able to successfully implement policies within its own structures, it will gain vital experience and knowledge about how a diverse workplace can be established. Therefore, it is possible that a diverse bureaucracy has better tools to deal with the lack of representation in the private sector. How this can be established can be found in the literature in the next section. These two motivations are the reason this memo states that change must

first and foremost come from within the government so it can have a positive impact on other sectors within society.

### Findings

The cause of why women are less likely to be appointed has to do with the culture within many organizations. In these organizations there is still a gender bias against women based on female stereotypes. Characteristics that are linked to effective managerial leadership are often associated with male stereotypical characteristics, making it difficult for women to be considered qualified for the position (Groeneveld et al., 2019). These include aspects such as goal oriented and ambition that are viewed as typical male qualities and therefore male employees have an advantage over their female counterparts. Males are also viewed as being more focused on their career while women are considered to be more focused of their families. This leads to males being more often considered for a promotion (Merens & Iedema, 2020). Besides these stereotypes there are also some practical disadvantages for women. If a woman has to leave because of a pregnancy, she will miss a critical step in their career development making it harder to get higher up. This is because it is already decided from early on in a career if someone has potential to reach higher office. On top of this part time work which many women prefer is still discouraged when it comes to top positions (van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011). All these factors contribute to male candidates getting promoted over female candidates to higher positions even though they have the same qualifications. However, there is a change in these views as female stereotypical characteristics mentoring and collaboration are in the modern day more and more considered as good qualities of a manager (Groeneveld et al., 2019). Some female stereotypes have even been positively linked with management in a crisis or times of change. However according to research from Groeneveld et al. (2019) this had no effect on the promotion of women in the Dutch bureaucracy during times of change.

Now that it is shown that there are many obstacles for women trying to get higher up, this section will focus the question of why it is important that the government focusses on fixing its own bureaucracy first. The main reason for this can be found in the concept of representative bureaucracy. This concept stresses the importance of a diversity of civil servants regarding their race, ethnicity and gender because this has a positive influence on the bureaucracy (Ricucci & Van Ryzin, 2016, p. 1). According to Ricucci and Van Ryzin (2016), a representative bureaucracy is beneficial in two ways. The first is in a practical sense. If bureaucrats have different backgrounds, they can provide new perspectives on policy implementation and are also able to voice the concerns of marginalized communities. Through these steps a bureaucracy can better serve all its citizens and is able to have new insights to improve its policies. The second is in a symbolic sense. This has to do with the fact that citizens that interact with the bureaucratic structure, will perceive the organization as fairer and more trustworthy when they can see that there are civil servants with different backgrounds and who are more reflective of the diversity of the society as a whole. This would also improve democratic governance because more groups are able to voice their perspective and are more included in the policy process (Ricucci & Van Ryzin, 2016, p. 7). The improvement of the representativeness of a bureaucracy is therefore of vital importance as it serves both practical as well as symbolic values.

These improvements become even more important, when we consider that a bureaucracy is the main source of legitimacy for the citizenry. Researchers such as Rothstein (2009) state that the output side, meaning the bureaucracy and the services a government provides is of a much greater importance to the legitimacy of a government than the impute side. This is according to Rothstein because people have a direct experience with the output side of government than with, they impute side. They will base their opinion of the government on these experiences with the output side. The most important aspect is impartiality, as citizens want the feeling that their cases are treated without judgement from the bureaucracy. Aspects such as discrimination can lower this legitimacy. Therefore, the output side has a lot more influence on government legitimacy (Rothstein, 2009). Improving the output side of a government

is therefore extremely important for a state to preserve the legitimacy it needs. More diversity can assist in increasing this legitimacy. More diversity provides more legitimacy as the citizens will perceive a diverse bureaucracy as more neutral and efficient both of which will increase their standing against the government as a whole.

### Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion it is shown that more women at the top of the bureaucracy is of vital importance. Representative bureaucracies can bring new insights to policy and can therefore be an improvement on the implementation of this policy, and is an important tool in creating legitimacy. This is because if citizens perceive a diverse bureaucracy that is reflective of their society as more neutral and trustworthy. This is especially important because the bureaucracy, the output of a government plays they most important role in creating legitimacy within a state because citizens come more into contact with this side. In the case of the Dutch bureaucracy, there need for more women in top positions. Despite it only being slightly above the private sector it is still not enough and not representative. The diversity quotas have not had a great impact on these numbers and it is therefore important that the government sets the right example in its own organization and looks for alternative policies to encourage diversity. As this diversity is also helpful in improving policy it could also assist in creating more effective policies to encourage diversity in the top in the private sector.

For the government to achieve this goal a couple of steps can be recommended. As the literature has suggested, the main problem is a cultural bias against the promotion of women in organizations that often leads to them being perceived as less qualified than men in higher positions. Therefore, the first thing the government needs to improve is the organizational culture around women. This must be done so the government can effectively deal with biases against women that prevents them from reaching higher positions. The negative female stereotypes, and the fact that some management aspects are viewed as masculine need to disappear within the organization. Changing an organizations culture is a long and difficult process but a good start is to create awareness among they employees. This can be through several campaigns within the organization like an ad campaign or sensitivity trainings that can create understanding and recognition against the biases against women. With the breakdown of stereotypical views, the likelihood that women are seriously considered for top bureaucratic positions increases. This would also involve creating awareness in the bureaucracy of the necessity of a representative bureaucracy and what positive effect this has on policy creation and legitimacy.

The second step is to make structural changes that would encourage women to reach higher office and that improves their chances of being considered for these top positions. One of these structural changes is to create part time positions at the top of the bureaucratic structure, as the previous section has shown that the majority of female employees prefer this type of position. This would improve the likelihood that female employees would apply to be considered for such positions. Another major factor is to ensure that women early on are not considered for future high positions because they might have to take time off to start a family. In order to solve these obstacles, there must be new ways in which people are considered for higher positions and new mechanisms that make it easier for people to apply and be equally evaluated based on their qualifications rather than on impressions that they gave in the past. This could be achieved for example by giving all they applicants a standardized test, to look if they have the right qualifications. This would eliminate some of they bias against women and would give them a better change.

These are some of the possible measures that could be instigated to improve the position of women within the Dutch bureaucracy. The main argument that this memo is trying to convey is to recognize that these types of problems are not fixed with a simple quota. They go much deeper and therefore require action that not only looks at the hiring process, but also the culture of an organization and the structures that are in place. A diversity quota alone is not going to get the results it requires. If it

is going to be used, it needs to be part of a large set of actions that together improve the position of women in the bureaucracy.



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