

## **Policy Brief**

### **Emancipation Starts from the Top: Promoting Diversity at the Top of the Dutch Bureaucracy**

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**Abstract:** 39.9% of top positions in the Dutch bureaucracy are filled by women. This does not accurately reflect society and is below the EU average. It is crucial to address this because the public perceives a representative bureaucracy as more legitimate. This percentage is caused by several obstacles that women face. These obstacles can be addressed by changing the organizational culture and some practical issues.

The Gender Equality Index of the European Union (EU) documents the position of women in the union's member states. Regarding employment, the Netherlands ranks as one of the most emancipated countries in the EU (Barbieri et al., 2022, pp. 24-27). This is not true, however, for all areas of employment. One area still lacking proportional female representation is at the top of organizations in the public and private sectors. This is also the case in the government bureaucracy, despite several policies to get more women into top positions (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). Given that these policies are already in place, what else can the government do to increase the

number of women in top positions, and why should the government look at its bureaucracy?

This policy memo argues that it is essential that the government gets a better representative and diverse top of its bureaucracy. This is important not only for the emancipation of women but also for governmental legitimacy. To argue this, the memo will use the concept of representative bureaucracy. Changing the organizational culture and structure that could limit female promotions is central to improving diversity at the bureaucratic top.

The structure of this memo is as follows. First, the purpose of this memo is discussed. Second, a problem description is given. Third, the obstacles women face, and the importance of representative bureaucracy, will be explained. Finally, some recommendations will be presented.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this memo is to analyze how the government can improve its diversity at the top of its bureaucracy. The focus on this topic is because it is an area that still has a low number of women, which stands in contrast with other areas of employment and female emancipation more generally. This is relevant for the Netherlands and also for other countries. The underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in public bureaucracies is a worldwide problem (Groeneveld et al., 2019, pp. 441-443). Therefore, exploring what else can be done in the Netherlands might give insights into what can be done in other countries.

The second reason for focusing on the bureaucracy is because the government has the ambition to improve the position of women in general. An example of this is the feminist

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foreign policy that the government has introduced (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2022). It has also tried to do this at the top of organizations. As described in the introduction, policies are already in place to improve the percentages of women at the top across different sectors. Analyzing the government may give some vital insights that it can apply in other sectors.

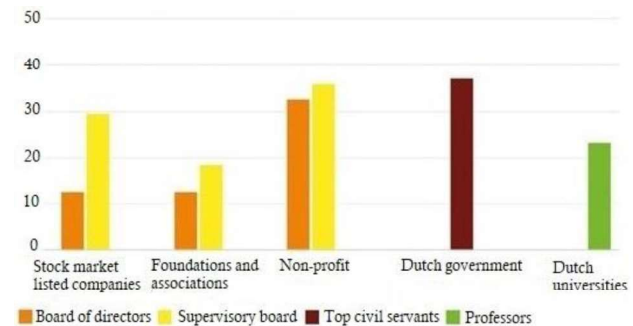
### Problem description

Inequality between men and women has always existed, especially regarding job opportunities and women's ability to get top positions. As shown in the introduction, the Netherlands also struggles with these inequalities. Although there are improvements, there remains a gap based on sex. Ideally, the percentage of women would mirror the rate in society (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011). This has been around 50%, with slightly more women than men (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022)

This gap is visible in the Dutch bureaucracy. In the top, called the *Algemene Bestuursdienst* or the general administrative service, the number of women serving was just 20% in 2008 (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). Over the following ten years, this had grown to 36% in 2018 but has only risen by one percent to 37% in 2019 (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS] & Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau [SCP], 2020, pp. 71–83). In 2022 the percentage had grown to 39.9% (Women Leaders Index, 2023). This is a positive trend; compared to other Dutch sectors, these percentages are among the highest. In the private sector, women held 15% of top offices at the most prominent Dutch companies in 2019 (Jongen et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). In the non-profit sector, this was around 35%; in universities, 23% of the professors were female in 2018. In the Dutch parliament

in 2020, 39% of the lower house members were female; in the upper house, this was 33% (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83). Compared to other EU countries, however, the Dutch numbers remain low. In 2022, the Netherlands was still below the EU average of 42.7%. Nine EU countries scored above 50%, with Bulgaria being the highest, with 59.5% (Women Leaders Index, 2023).

**Figure 1: Percentage of women at the top in each sector in the Netherlands**



Source: 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 the author.

Looking at these percentages, it is visible that the Netherlands still needs to make progress to become more representative at the top. This is despite the government's ambitions. It has introduced diversity quotas, which refers to legislation making hiring more women for top positions mandatory. Although the government has reached its own goals within the bureaucracy, in other organizations, they had little effect (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83). In summary, although when looking at the national level, the percentage of women is one of the highest across different sectors, it still

needs to be representative of the wider society and is below the EU average.

### Obstacles

Women in the bureaucracy face two obstacles when trying to get a top position. The first is the unconscious biases against women within the organizational culture. These unconscious biases exist in many organizations. Characteristics linked to effective managerial leadership are often associated with stereotypically male features, making it difficult for women to be considered qualified for the position (Groeneveld et al., 2019). These include qualities such as “goal-oriented” and “ambition” that are viewed as “typical male qualities.” Therefore, male candidates have an advantage over their female counterparts. Men are also considered more focused on their careers, while women are viewed as more focused on their families. This leads to men being more often considered for a promotion (Merens & Iedema, 2020).

These views are changing, as stereotypically female characteristics, such as “mentoring” and “collaboration,” are increasingly seen as good qualities for managerial positions (Groeneveld et al., 2019). Some female stereotypes have been positively linked with management in times of crisis or change. However, this development has not yet led to many practical results in the Dutch bureaucracy; according to research from Groeneveld et al. (2019), this change did not affect the promotion of women in the Dutch bureaucracy during times of change.

The second reason has to do with practical limitations, particularly concerning pregnancy. If a woman must leave because of a pregnancy, she will miss critical steps in her career development, making it harder to get

promoted. This is because it can already be decided early in a career if someone has the potential to reach higher office (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011). This can lead to ‘off ramping,’ where a woman could lose 18% of her earning power when she leaves work because of pregnancy (Hewlett, 2019). Another limitation is the discouragement of part-time working in top positions, which women prefer (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011). This is particularly true in the Netherlands. On average, 3 out of 10 women in the EU work part-time. In the Netherlands, almost three-quarters of the female workforce works part-time. This leads to fewer women getting promoted (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 118–121).

### Importance of representation

For a bureaucracy, it is essential to address this gap within its organization. This importance can be understood with the concept of representative bureaucracy. This concept originated in the work of Kingsley in 1944, who discussed representation in the English civil service. He argued that class representation is critical to democratic rule. As society evolves over the years, bureaucracies should mirror these evolutions. The concept stresses the importance of diverse civil servants regarding their cultural background, ethnicity, identity, and sex because this positively influences 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. A bureaucracy can better serve all its citizens through these steps and find new ways to

improve its policies. The second way is in a symbolic sense. This is because citizens interacting with the bureaucratic structure will perceive the organization as fairer and more trustworthy when they see civil servants with different backgrounds. This is more reflective of the diverse society. This would also improve democratic governance because more groups are able to voice their perspective and are included in the policy process (Ricucci & Van Ryzin, 2016, p. 7). Therefore, increasing representation within a bureaucracy is vital, as it serves practical and symbolic values.

However, It is important to point out that representative bureaucracy must not be purely symbolic but have fundamental structural changes. Hoang et al. (2022) have found that when organizations only focus on hiring more people from underrepresented groups is insufficient for promoting diversity. Only focusing on numbers creates a risk that such diversity policies are viewed as nothing more than preferential treatment and that the groups it aims to help are less competent. This shows that representation alone is not enough. There must be additional steps to ensure diversity is accepted in the organization.

If these steps are taken, they can enhance bureaucratic outcomes and influence citizens' perceptions of governmental legitimacy (Headley et al., 2021). Researchers such as Rothstein (2009) argue that the output side, meaning the bureaucracy and the services a government provides, is of much greater importance to the legitimacy of a government than the input side, referring to democratically chosen political leaders. According to Rothstein (2009), people have more direct interactions with the output side of government than with the input side. They base their opinion of the government on these experiences as a result. The most important

aspect of this is impartiality, as citizens want the feeling that their cases are treated without judgment from the bureaucracy. Factors such as discrimination or prejudice can lower this legitimacy (Rothstein, 2009). In short, diversity can assist with increasing the government's legitimacy, but only if the diversity is not purely symbolic. It must be able to lead to fundamental changes. Interactions between citizens and bureaucrats are not necessarily different just because the bureaucrat and the citizen have a similar background. A citizen will base their vision of legitimacy on the interaction rather than other factors like a shared heritage or characteristics with the bureaucrat (Headley et al., 2021). Proper representation is a particularly relevant point for the Dutch bureaucracy, as polling has shown that the Dutch public favors more diversity at the top of organizations, despite their opposition to mandatory diversity quotas (CBS & SCP, 2020, pp. 71–83).

### Recommendations

If the government wants to create more diversity at the top, a couple of steps can be recommended. As the literature has suggested, the main obstacles are a cultural bias within the organization and some practical limitations that give male candidates an advantage.

Therefore, the first step must be to improve the organizational culture around women. Taking steps to address negative biases against women and the perception of some management aspects as masculine can enhance women's chances to reach higher positions. Changing an organization's culture is a long and complicated process requiring continuous attention. An excellent start to this process is spreading awareness among the employees. This can be done with the help of several campaigns within the organization, like an

advertising campaign or sensitivity training to create understanding and recognition of these biases. This can also involve spreading awareness of the importance of a representative bureaucracy and what positive effect this has on policy and legitimacy. Awareness and recognizing that obstacles exist is always the first step in solving an issue.

The second step is to make structural changes that encourage more women to take higher positions and improve their chances when applying for these top positions. This can be done by creating part-time positions at the top of the bureaucratic structure, as most Dutch female employees prefer this position. This can encourage more women to apply for these positions. Another factor that can be improved is the selection process itself. The selection process needs to remove selections based on impressions employees give at the beginning of their careers as much as possible, as this is the phase women might miss because of pregnancy. This could be achieved, for example, by giving all the applicants a standardized test to look for the right qualifications.

### Conclusion

This memo has argued the importance of improving female representation at the top of the Dutch bureaucracy. A gap based on sex can be detected when it comes to top positions in this bureaucracy. Although the percentage of women in top positions is among the highest compared to other Dutch organizations and sectors, it is still not representative of the broader Dutch society. It is also lower than the EU average, and many EU states have a higher percentage. This is caused by several obstacles that women face in the bureaucracy. These include biases against women and women having a chance of missing vital career

steps if they leave employment due to pregnancy.

For a bureaucracy, it is essential to improve this diversity. This is because representation is tied to governmental legitimacy. If citizens see that the output side, meaning the bureaucracy, is more diverse and understands their circumstances, they perceive it as more neutral and trustworthy. On top of this, diversity also has some practical advantages. Representative bureaucracies can bring new insights to and improve the implementation of policy.

Significantly, if the government wants to encourage more diversity, it mustn't solely rely on a diversity quota. There should be an integrated view that looks not only at the possible obstacles in the hiring process but also at the organizational culture and other disadvantages for women that may prevent them from reaching top positions. There needs to be more than a diversity quota to get the results it strives for. If used, it needs to be part of a more extensive set of actions, which can improve women's position in organizations. To get more women into top jobs, we do not only need to hire more women; we need to ensure that the organization supports them.



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