



Photo by WfWP member Water Mothers Myanmar

Five women leading a male dominated water management world in The Netherlands

“Think in possibilities, not in problems”

The Netherlands' very existence is largely a result of excellent water management and its water resource technologies and policies have consequently become state of the art expertise implemented worldwide. Less well known is that the Dutch also lead long overdue change in the still very male dominated water management world: five CEOs of the ten companies handling the nations' drinking water supply are women.

By Women for Water Partnership

Women and children bear the primary responsibility for water collection in 76% of households in developing countries, spending 150 to 200 million hours a day to fetch, carry, store, and manage household water. They have intimate knowledge of water sources, water quality, and daily household water requirements. Yet they are frequently shut out of decisions relating to water.¹ And not only in developing nations: Globally, only 17% of employees in the water sector are female. A percentage that rapidly decreases towards the top of water organizations, institutions and companies.²

It would not just be a matter of equality, but also very wise to give women more influence in water management. Water projects designed and implemented with the full participation of women are more sustainable and effective than those without, as demonstrated by a World Bank and International Red Cross study³. A 'Task Force on Gender and Water' found that when women are trained to contribute to asset management there is greater sustainability of assets due to improved operation and maintenance.⁴

In a broader perspective surveys by McKinsey & Company and Catalyst revealed that companies with greater gender diversity in their leadership teams outperform those with less, often by as much as 30%. The Catalyst Report revealed that Fortune 500⁵ companies with three or more women on the Board gained a significant performance advantage over those with fewer – 73% return on sales, 83% return on equity, and 112% return on invested capital. McKinsey & Company found that companies with the highest percentage of women in executive committees delivered better performance than those with all-male executives, exceeding all-male executives by 41% in a return on equity and by 56% in operating results.⁶

Scarcity of women water professionals, entrenched cultural and traditional attitudes, gender stereotyping, and perceptions that women lack managerial and technical skills are among the multiple elements that work in tandem to keep women at the margins of water management positions. Leadership is not about appointing women to token positions, but about truly enabling them to influence decision making for the benefit of women, as well as men. Closing the gender gap means equal representation of men and women in all aspects of leadership, including water leadership.⁷

In this context, it is encouraging to learn that there actually is a country where the responsibility to bringing water into homes and industries is in perfect harmony shared between men and women. That these women are paid well for doing so. Five CEOs out of in total ten drinking water companies in The Netherlands are women.



Riksta Zwart



Annette Ottolini



Lieve Declercq



Ria Doedel



Joke Cuperus

Lack of women?

Finding women willing and capable to work in the high-tech water sector remains also in The Netherlands a difficult task, says Riksta Zwart, since 2014 the first ever female CEO of Waterbedrijf Groningen, a water company in the north of The Netherlands with 210 employees serving 575.000 small and large-scale consumers annually. "Of course, we try to get more women on board. Unfortunately, women often don't think of choosing a technical university or college study in the water sector. Therefore, more men than women have the appropriate technical qualifications for our field and hence most applicants are men. We do however explicitly encourage both female and male youngsters to visit our open days and get a glimpse of the diverse and exciting world of the water sector."

This lack of women with technical interests is not entirely true though: Annette Ottolini leads Evides, which covers water supply to 2.5 million people consumers in the Southwest provinces of The Netherlands. Evides has an internal training program and currently 50% of the trainees are women. Not because of a privileged selection but due to sufficient interest of women to work in the sector: "We evaluate applicants by his or her own unique qualities. Qualities such as leadership style, vision, concern and workstyle are central in cooperation."

Ottolini does however think that diversity and having a mix of men and women is beneficial for an organization: "We pay special attention to that in our recruitment. It is important within teams to have a good mix, both in the relationship between men and women, and in age, background, etcetera."

Be true to yourself

Ria Doedel worked for 17 years as Managing Director in three major municipalities, before taking on a completely different career as CEO of WML, managing water supply to 1,1 million residents and 15,000 businesses in The Netherlands' most southern province. Doedel admits that WML so far has not been successful in increasing the number of women in line with a

30% directive set in the Netherlands: "One of the hurdles is that women do not always want to make the effort a job at this level demands. A demanding job and a family, raise children, study and keeping up with friends? You cannot have it all. One has to make choices and accept the consequences of that choice."

Lieve Declercq, CEO of Vitens, the largest water company in The Netherlands delivering drinking water to 5.6 million people, sees this differently: "I think in possibilities, not in problems. Combining work and a family is possible too. Men with young families are also tired, as are women, but don't let that hold you back. And if you really want to make a career, invest your time and energy in yourself, and in doing what you love most. Believe in yourself. I personally do not find it productive at all to separate private and work life. Work-time is also me-time: I love my job. My advice is to find a job that you love, then work becomes what you love to do most, and so you'll be successful at it."

Zwart has a similar advice for women who want to make it in the water sector, or anywhere else: "Never howl with the wolves. Be true to yourself and your own ideas and know that the choices you make are right for you. No matter how difficult it is for you, it's better to go with what you feel is the right decision for both your client and the company. I am in the right place, I feel at home. I can do this job in a way that matches my personality. I lead with transparency, trust, honesty. Listening and communicating openly in a give-and-take manner is beneficial to everyone – the staff, the company and the client. But, reaching the top is not everyone's ambition. Doing your job well and growing in a lateral way brings many people greater job satisfaction and less stress."

Don't patronize

Declercq has made it her "personal mission to change the company, because I believe diversity leads to better results". She therefore introduced a 30% female employees directive where possible: "When I started working for Vitens in 2012, there was no internal pipeline for women so we had to invest by

recruiting women into team management and then promoting them internally. Currently 25% of the workforce are women and I'm working towards the minimum stipulation of 30% of the workforce in the company being women. With 33,3%, we will be there in terms of division management which directly reports into me, so we now need to focus on second-line team management. We have about 70 team managers, of which 26% are female. If there is a vacancy in a team where there are no women, then I insist a woman is hired. I do get some pushback. Managers may sigh a bit, but when it is done they all agree it's better for their teams."

In contrast Joke Cuperus, CEO of PWN which delivers water to 780.000 households and businesses in the province of Noord-Holland, does not believe in enforcing quota at all: "You should believe in your own strength. We don't patronize people by employing them because they are of a specific gender or ethnic group: we employ the best. The turnover in PWN is very low: our employees like working here and stay many, many years. But when we do have a vacancy, we invite everyone qualified for the job, from all diverse sectors. The most suitable person will get the job. Women have to apply themselves. It's possible if you organize your life well. You do need a lot of energy. I think you can have a family and a fulltime career: I did it and have no regrets. Take your chance, accept challenges, be courageous. I am a workaholic. I have never had a mentor, I didn't want to shadow the previous CEO, it's not a good start for me to do that, I need to find my own way. I can sense an organization. I have never been hindered in my career because I am a woman. I never planned to be at the top. I got here because I was the best

candidate for the job. What was most important to me was the challenge. It takes courage to take a completely different step. And it's important to keep moving forward."

Interviews: Michele Aime. Concept and story composition: Frederique Holle and Arnold Marseille

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- 2 United Nations World Water Development Report 2016, Water and Jobs, UNESCO, Paris France, 2016
- 3 B. Gross, C. van Wijk, and N. Mukherjee. 2000. Linking Sustainability with Demand, Gender and Poverty: A Study in Community-Managed Water Supply Projects in 15 Countries. Delft: Water and Sanitation Program
- 4 Inter-agency Task Force on Gender and Water. 2006. Gender, Water and Sanitation: A Policy Brief. New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA)
- 5 Fortune 500 is an annual list of the 500 largest companies in the United States, as compiled by Fortune magazine
- 6 Catalyst. 2007. The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards (2004-2008). <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/bottom-line-corporate-performance-and-womens-representation-boards>; McKinsey & Company. 2013. Gender Diversity in Top Management: Moving Corporate Culture, Moving Boundaries. Women Matter 2013. Paris. http://www.mckinsey.com/features/women_matter
- 7 Women, Water, and Leadership, ADB Briefs No.24, December 2014

Women for Water Partnership is a unique partnership of women's organizations and networks, uniting women leadership in around 134 predominantly low and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA region) and Western Europe, reaching over one million women. WfWP's vision is a water secure world in which women are heard and empowered to exercise their full potential to achieve equitable and sustainable development. WfWP's mission is to position women as active leaders, experts, partners and agents of change to realize access to safe water for all - including gender responsive sanitation – for all use. www.womenforwater.org