

Caroline Holtgreffe SER Topvrouwen

December 2024



Advancing Gender Balance in Leadership: Insights from Caroline Holtgreffe

We were honored to host **Caroline Holtgreffe** as a guest speaker in **Pedersen & Partners' DE&I Live Talk Series**. A visionary and the leader of **SER Topvrouwen**, Caroline has played a transformative role in driving gender diversity across the Dutch corporate landscape. Her initiatives have broken systemic barriers and converted discussions about equity into measurable, impactful strategies.

This event was organised by **Lydia van der Meulen**, Global Head of the Life Sciences & Healthcare Practice Group at Pedersen & Partners, and moderated by **Hans Lodewijks**, Client Partner and Country Manager for the Netherlands. Together with Caroline, Lydia and Hans explored how organisations can enhance gender balance in leadership and foster more equitable workplaces.

The current state of gender equity in the Netherlands

Despite its progressive reputation, the Netherlands ranks only **28th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index** and **24th in The Economist's Glass Ceiling Index**. These rankings reveal both the milestones achieved and the challenges that remain in advancing women into leadership roles.

One key hurdle is cultural bias. Research involving **15,000 executives** found that while many claimed to see no difference in male and female leadership capabilities, **81% subconsciously believed men were better suited to lead**. Addressing these entrenched perceptions is essential to driving meaningful progress.

SER Topvrouwen: a model for driving change

Caroline highlighted the achievements of **SER Topvrouwen**, an initiative launched in 2016 to combat the lack of women in corporate boardrooms. Among its key successes is a **database of over 3,800 board-ready women**, dismantling the myth of insufficient female talent and providing organisations with a free resource to achieve diversity targets.

The initiative also influenced the **2021 gender quota law**, mandating diversity goals for supervisory boards and senior management. Additionally, tools like the **Diversity Portal** and **Data Explorer** promote transparency by tracking and publishing gender balance data across Dutch companies, holding organisations accountable for their progress.

Overcoming persistent challenges

Caroline noted three significant barriers that continue to hinder gender equity in the workplace:

Part-time work culture

- Many Dutch women work part-time, particularly in sectors like healthcare and education, limiting their promotion to leadership roles. Caroline added a nuanced perspective, noting that **while 67% of women in the Netherlands work part-time** (compared to just 18% of men), the broader context matters. In the third quarter of 2024, the **net employment rate among women was 69.2%**, while **among men it was 77.2%**. Additionally, 44% of women are financially dependent on their partner or the government, whereas this figure drops to 23% among men. Encouragingly, **the percentage of women in paid work has risen significantly—from 35% in the 1970s to 77% today.**

Career timing

- Women often delay pursuing senior roles until after raising children, underscoring the need for inclusive policies and career development programs that accommodate life transitions.

Leadership commitment

- Genuine advocacy from CEOs and senior leaders is critical. Leaders must view diversity as a core business imperative and drive change authentically within their organisations.

Why gender diversity is good for business

Caroline emphasised that as with other types of diversity, gender diversity is not only an ethical responsibility but also a strategic advantage. Research, including McKinsey's **Women in the Workplace 2024 Report**, reinforces this by showing how gender-balanced teams:

Foster innovation through diverse perspectives.

Enhance decision-making by leveraging complementary viewpoints.

Drive financial success with more profitable outcomes for organisations that have women in senior leadership roles

Creating an inclusive workplace also results in a more motivated and engaged workforce, contributing to long-term organisational success.

Redefining leadership culture

True equity requires organisations to redesign leadership pathways. Caroline stressed the importance of leadership programs that reflect diverse career trajectories and enable women to progress without compromising their personal aspirations.

ADVANCING GENDER BALANCE IN LEADERSHIP: INSIGHTS FROM CAROLINE HOLTGREFE

SER Topvrouwen has successfully engaged CEOs as ambassadors for diversity, leveraging their influence to inspire peer organisations and embed inclusivity as a cultural norm.

Key takeaways for businesses

Leverage transparency tools

Many Dutch women work part-time, particularly in sectors like healthcare and education, limiting their promotion to leadership roles.

Champion CEO advocacy

Leadership buy-in is crucial for sustainable change.

Remove structural barriers

Policies must support flexible working arrangements and leadership opportunities for women at all stages of their careers.

Prioritise diversity for results

Gender-balanced teams yield measurable benefits, from innovation to profitability.

Further evidence supporting gender equity

Research from the **Harvard Business Review** highlights that women outperform men in **15 out of 16 leadership competencies**, including initiative, integrity, teamwork, and problem-solving. Women particularly excel in interpersonal skills such as inspiring and motivating others, which are crucial for effective leadership.

Similarly, McKinsey's **Women in the Workplace 2024 report** underlines that while representation of women at the top has increased (e.g., a **12% rise in C-suite roles since 2015**), challenges persist—particularly for women of colour. Organisations that prioritise leadership training and equitable policies are better positioned to overcome these obstacles.

A collective call to action

Caroline concluded the session with a compelling message: achieving gender equity demands collective effort, ongoing dialogue, and bold leadership. By using tools, frameworks, and commitments such as those championed by **SER Topvrouwen**, the journey toward gender-balanced leadership is both achievable and transformative.

At **Pedersen & Partners**, we are proud to amplify these conversations and continue supporting initiatives that make workplaces more inclusive and representative of our diverse world.