



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN IN ENGINEERING DAY

June 23rd, 2024

Do you perceive differences regarding women presence in STEM fields between the private and public sector?

That is a rather difficult question. I have been doing my postdoctoral work at KTH, where I am also employed as a researcher since many years before – I started my PhD-studies in 2009 and have been employed at KTH since then. I've just been stationed at a different institution, the Department of Real Estate and Construction Management, instead of the department where I am employed, the Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering, for the duration of my postdoc. Though I have been working on the projects I received funding for while working at the latter institution, so I haven't really been into the real estate field at all. Hence both institutions are at KTH, which belongs to the public sector.

There are quite a difference in how these two institutions relate to the gender issue, though. At the Department of Real Estate and Construction Management there are a lot of women in all kinds of positions, from PhD-students to professors, at the Department of Civil and Architectural Engineering not so much... At PhD-student level there is a somewhat balanced mix there too, but the higher in the hierarchy you get, the more of a man's world it is. Not that there is anything wrong with the guys, they are good people – there just isn't all that much space for women in their ranks...

Now, when I got out on the job market as an architect that was the case too – despite there being a perfect balance between men and women in the Architecture School, once we got out on the job market there was a clear difference in how we were treated, generally speaking. Even if men and women both go on maternity/paternity leave in Sweden, there was still an anticipation that women would be less focused on their careers and hence in general (though there were exceptions) shouldn't be given the same career opportunities as men. It might not have been quite as pronounced everywhere as it was where I worked my first couple of years, but my first employment was at an office which was a brutal world to be a woman in – so I learned early to survive in a world where being a woman was a handicap. I was happy about getting my first grey hairs – when I did look older the people on building sites stopped asking me to make the coffee for them (which I of course never did) instead of taking part in the meetings for real... You learn that you have to have something substantial to contribute with, something which can't be ignored, if you want to be taken seriously in that kind of context.



I think it is a mistake that many younger women do today, though, when they try to be “good” or “better” than their male co-workers – the focus should be on the work and your contribution to it, not on yourself and how you are being perceived. Otherwise it is very easy to get into overdoing things – and often the wrong things – in order to look good, and exhausting yourself in the process. An unhealthy dose of prestige-fixation and looking-good is otherwise one of the less advantageous hallmarks of a male dominated environment – it doesn’t help if women get into that as well. But ok, like many women who choose a male-dominated field of work, I don’t have a very typically female way of thinking – I’m a lot more task-oriented than people-pleasing, and more focused on results than on people’s feelings, at least if those feelings are about pride and prestige...

The engineering business in the private sector today I think is a lot more open to women than it used to be, but let’s admit it, though it might be changing, the building business as such is still pretty much a male world, especially if you get out on the construction sites.