

SWITZERLAND OVERVIEW / Suisse, vue d'ensemble

Women in Architecture Seminar

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The situation

Despite the equal numbers of female and male architects being trained in Switzerland, women are significantly under-represented in the industry's ranks. There are various reasons for this, although these are sometimes difficult to determine. The statistical data show that the proportion of female students registered for Bachelor's and Master's degrees in architecture at Switzerland's three universities – Zurich, Lausanne and Mendrisio – is around 50% and has remained more or less unchanged for the last few years. According to the indexes provided by the Swiss University Information System (SIUS) and the Federal Office of Statistics (OFS), since 2009 the number of women completing an architecture course has very rarely fallen below 45% of the total throughout Switzerland. There has also been a significant increase in the number of women who continue their education after graduation and complete a doctorate. At the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL), this percentage increased from 15% in 2009 to 45% in 2011 and rose to 69% in 2013. Is this something to celebrate? Not quite, as these figures fail to represent the reality that follows graduation.

One publication on the topic of the underrepresentation of women in architecture in Switzerland found in 2004 that, ten years after receiving their diploma, only 10% of female architects were still professionally involved in the industry¹, a statistic which, according to the same study, had remained unchanged for twenty years. We do not have any comparable current data and, while this figure has probably improved since, female architects remain underrepresented in major roles as well as in public office or in higher education.

The Faculty of Architecture at the EPFL, which welcomes ever larger numbers of female architectural doctoral candidates, boasts only four women in professorial posts as opposed to twenty-eight men. No women have attained the posts of honorary professor or tenured professor. It is interesting, however, to note that in less prestigious posts, such as that of associate professor, women are much better represented although they remain a minority; there are currently 30 female and 59 male associate professors.

In a similar vein, there are very few women at the head of architectural firms in professional practice and, when they are in charge, they often work alone or alongside female colleagues in smaller organisations, meaning that they are rarely able to successfully seek out major projects and must settle for correspondingly limited

¹ Schumacher, Christina (2004): *Zur Untervertretung von Frauen im Architekturberuf*. Nationales Forschungsprogramm 43: Bildung und Beschäftigung. Synthesis no. 12. Bern: Schweizerischer Nationalfonds.

remuneration. There are also many instances of couples of architects working together, an approach which may in certain cases make it easier to balance work and family life.

We have also found that the two major professional architectural associations in Switzerland have relatively low female membership numbers: 19% of the 15 thousand members of the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA) and around 12% of the members of the Federation of Swiss Architects (FAS), which includes 108 women as opposed to 890 men across various cantons. These figures may in part be explained by the fact that the two organisations primarily attract self-employed professionals as well as due to their membership criteria. Within the SIA professionals may simply choose to become members by paying an annual fee, while FAS membership is by invitation. The rather opaque selection process is carried out by a committee within the FAS and is *a priori*, motivated by a certain acknowledgement of the quality of an architect's work. Independent architects working within smaller organisations, which is the case for a majority of women in the industry, rarely have access to larger projects which require major time investments, often unpaid, as is the case with competitions. Their work is therefore often ignored by professional publications, and this lack of visibility leads to a lack of professional acknowledgement in an industry dominated by men.

One fact that cannot be ignored, however, is that women are very well represented within those same architectural firms which distinguish themselves in competitions. These are primarily younger women in full-time employment, and one of the primary obstacles faced by female architects is that of reconciling their professional and private lives, especially in terms of child-minding. The availability of part-time positions, whether for men or women, has not yet been achieved.

Beginning in 2004, a network of female architects and engineers has formed in Switzerland in the hope of creating, within the SIA, a reference body on the question of "gender". The activities of this network, currently made up of five groups of professionals engaged in voluntary work in various regions of Switzerland, is aimed at defending the interests of female architects and engineers and supporting and encouraging them throughout their careers. This very active network often works together with other organisations in Switzerland committed to encouraging gender diversity and equality.

The activities of the women's network and sia

In 2008 a workshop organised by the network in French-speaking Switzerland identified the major obstacles faced by female architects throughout their careers and set out methods to help them in overcoming them. Three types of obstacle arise again and again: difficulty in reaching posts with greater responsibility and important contracts, an environment dominated by male role models and difficulty in reconciling their careers and motherhood. The consequences of these obstacles may lead them to abandon the profession, to become isolated, lose confidence in themselves, suffer a stagnation of their skills or even to become despondent. On the basis of the workshops' results, the group developed a programme including meetings, round tables, conferences, family workshops, publications and visits to major construction sites led by

female architects as well as trips abroad to examine their work in other countries and to encourage the creation of networks between female architects.

In addition, the group has heavily invested in publicising engineering careers, especially to young women, either by organising workshops presenting the sector in schools or by participating in open days, festivals and exhibitions intended for children. In April 2015 the publication of an children's book entitled *Ingénieuse Eugénie*, by Anne Wilsdorf, marked the end of nearly four years of work by the network in French-speaking Switzerland, financed by the SIA. Translated into German and Italian, this book is intended to promote technical professions to very young girls between the ages of 4 and 9. It is accompanied by a workbook containing experiments based on the curriculum in Switzerland. The book has received a tremendous welcome from public educational establishments and has been chosen to take part in the Bataille des Livres (BdL), an association to promote reading in six French-speaking countries: Switzerland, Haiti, Canada, Senegal, Belgium and France.

Since its creation, the women's network within SIA has continued to grow. The proportion of female members within the association has increased from 13.7% to 19.5% over ten years. This may still be a relatively low percentage, but initial signs are positive and show that there is still a long road ahead in the struggle to change the current cultural models in the world of work and in education in order to achieve diversity and equal opportunity in technical professions in Switzerland. The SIA has also released a national survey to its members under the management of consulting firm UND, which is specialised in the topic of reconciling professional and private lives. This investigation is intended in particular to examine the reasons for the current low percentage of women within the association and to find short-term measures to increase female membership. The project is supported by the Swiss Confederation and by the Federal Office for Equality between women and men.