



Woodworking Industry Gender Equality Survey Report 2023

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Summary

An online survey was developed by Sylva Foundation in 2023, aiming to gather data and information from employers from the woodworking industry in Britain concerning gender equality. Limited existing research, supported by anecdotal evidence, had indicated significant gender inequality. The 2023 survey was completed on behalf of 28 businesses by respondents who were 56% male. Businesses represented were mainly involved in manufacturing with wood and were furniture makers. In total, 954 employees were represented, with the largest business employing 135 people, the smallest 5. Across all businesses, 20% of the workforce were women. Among senior roles, 29% were held by women. Among those working in manufacturing, 8.5% were women. Most respondents believed that their place of work was gender inclusive, and a wide range of comments were received, some stressing the difficulty of recruiting women to their business. Sylva Foundation intends to use the results of this survey to inform a new programme aiming to support gender equality in the wood-based furniture industry.

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Introduction

Sylva Foundation is an environmental charity which undertakes a wide range of activities, including running a successful Wood School in Oxfordshire, England. We aim to bridge the gap between education and employment for those who want to work in the wood industry, while promoting the use of home-grown timber. Our experiences running activities and connecting with both education institutions and industry, have made it increasingly evident there is a serious and significant issue with gender inequality in the wood industry. With the help of industry and experienced industry professionals, Sylva Foundation is developing a proposal for a new and co-ordinated programme of activities that will seek to address gender inequality in the furniture industry. Our proposed work programme has already attracted the support of education institutions and several highly respected industry employers.

After completing desk-based research in support of our gender equality programme it was immediately apparent that there was very little evidence concerning gender equality in the furniture industry, but what little evidence existed all pointed to significant inequality. This evidence supported anecdotal evidence, in the form of personal stories that we were hearing first-hand from both experienced furniture makers and students alike.

The furniture making industry does not have a diverse workforce. According to the Design Council (2020), in 2018, only 22% of the design workforce were female, when 47% of the wider UK workforce were female, and only 5% of Industrial and Product Designers were female. Among makers, anecdotally the imbalance is far worse although no published statistics are available. Among 70 UK furniture companies, only five are run by women, but in these companies they have a 50:50 ratio of men/women employees (Lynn Jones, *pers. comm.*). Those who identify as women or non-binary are therefore significantly under-represented, meaning that half of the UK's workforce has been excluded from the industry. The gender imbalance in woodworking education and within workplaces, remains clearly visible and a serious concern.

Sylva Foundation already has a track record of survey-based research, including its creation and management of the British Woodlands Survey. We decided to initiate our own research among the furniture-making industry to better understand the diversity of the sector's workforce, and to help provide base-line data as part of our evidence-based research that will provide the foundation for our Wood Working Women Programme.

Method

In 2023, an online survey was designed by Sylva Foundation with the support of a working group representing the furniture-making industry. The survey was presented as a Google Form, comprising 21 questions. The majority of questions were mandatory and based on predefined options. Free text options were limited to permitting respondents to qualify some responses, and to provide more general information or feedback.

The welcome text for the survey was as follows:

This survey is run by Sylva Foundation, an environmental and educational charity. We are seeking to understand the current nature of gender equality among furniture industries in the UK, with a focus

on those who manufacture predominantly with wood. At present we are seeking to attract responses only from employers.

Findings from this research will help inform our future work supporting education and training in the wood sector.

The survey should take no longer than 10 minutes to complete. Thank you for your interest.

Respondents were encouraged to take part by word of mouth and limited direct invitation to known contacts in the woodworking industry. The survey was left open to respondents for a period of six weeks during the summer of 2023. Respondents were asked to provide a name and contact information (*i.e.* the survey was not anonymous), although any acceptance of follow-up communication was optional.

Results

Respondents

The gender of survey respondents was 56% male and 44% female.

Respondents completed the survey on behalf of 28 woodworking businesses.

Business types represented were almost entirely (96%) companies (businesses registered at Companies House), with one sole trader (<4%) taking part. Due to the nature of some of the questions, the responses of this sole trader were excluded from some data analyses.

Activities among businesses represented in the survey were recorded, comprising 15 pre-determined activities plus a range of 'Other' activities (Figure 1). All businesses (28) classified as 'Furniture Making' businesses, with the top three activities subsequently being 'Workshop Management' (19); 'Furniture Project Management' and 'Production Management' (18 jointly). Other activities included: Interior Architectural and Interior Design; Delivering Furniture Courses'; 'Marketing and Sales'; 'Customer Care' and 'Logistics'.

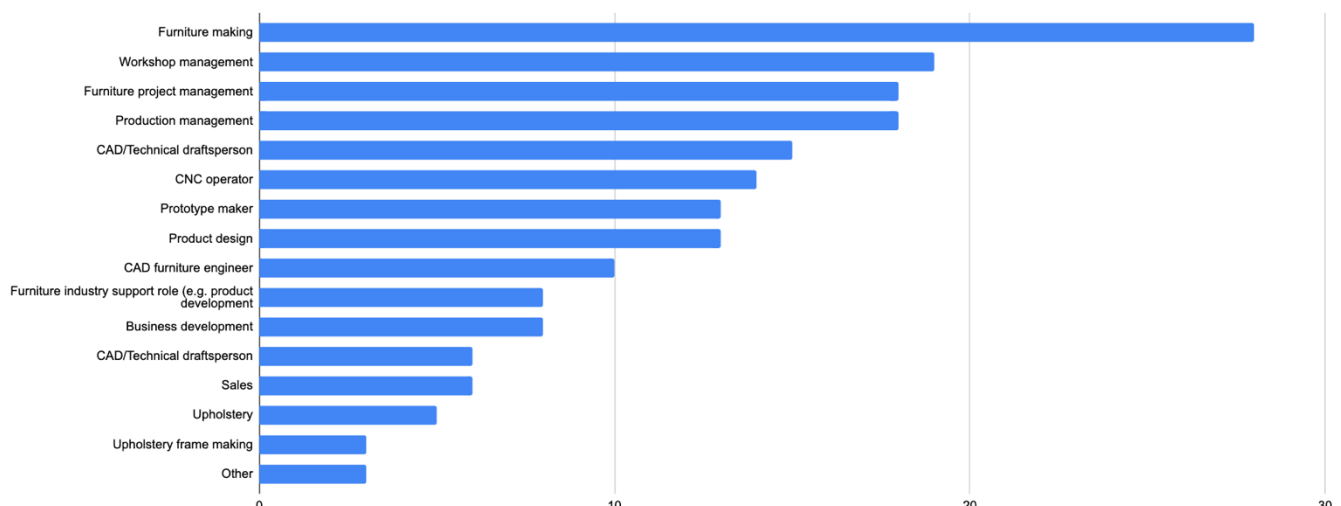


Figure 1 Distribution of business activities among respondents.

Among all respondents, wood was the dominant material used in products manufactured by 93% of businesses.

All respondents represented businesses based in the UK, the majority of which were located in the south of England (Figure 2).

In total across all businesses, 954 people were employed (mean 35, min 1, max 135). Excluding the sole practitioner, the minimum business size was 5 employees. Among these, the number of people working at senior level was 130 (mean 5, range 2-12). Among these, 438 people were employed directly in the manufacture of products, *i.e.* working with machinery or on the shop floor (mean 16, range 1- 65).



Figure 2 Geographic distribution of respondents.

Gender Equality

As reported above, we asked respondents to detail specific roles for people with senior level roles in the business and in manufacturing roles, allowing us to calculate a 'remainder' proportion of the workforce (e.g. sales, administration, design etc). Across all businesses the proportions were: senior role (124; 13.7%), manufacturing role (437; 48.2%), and remainder (345, 38.1%), see Figure 3.

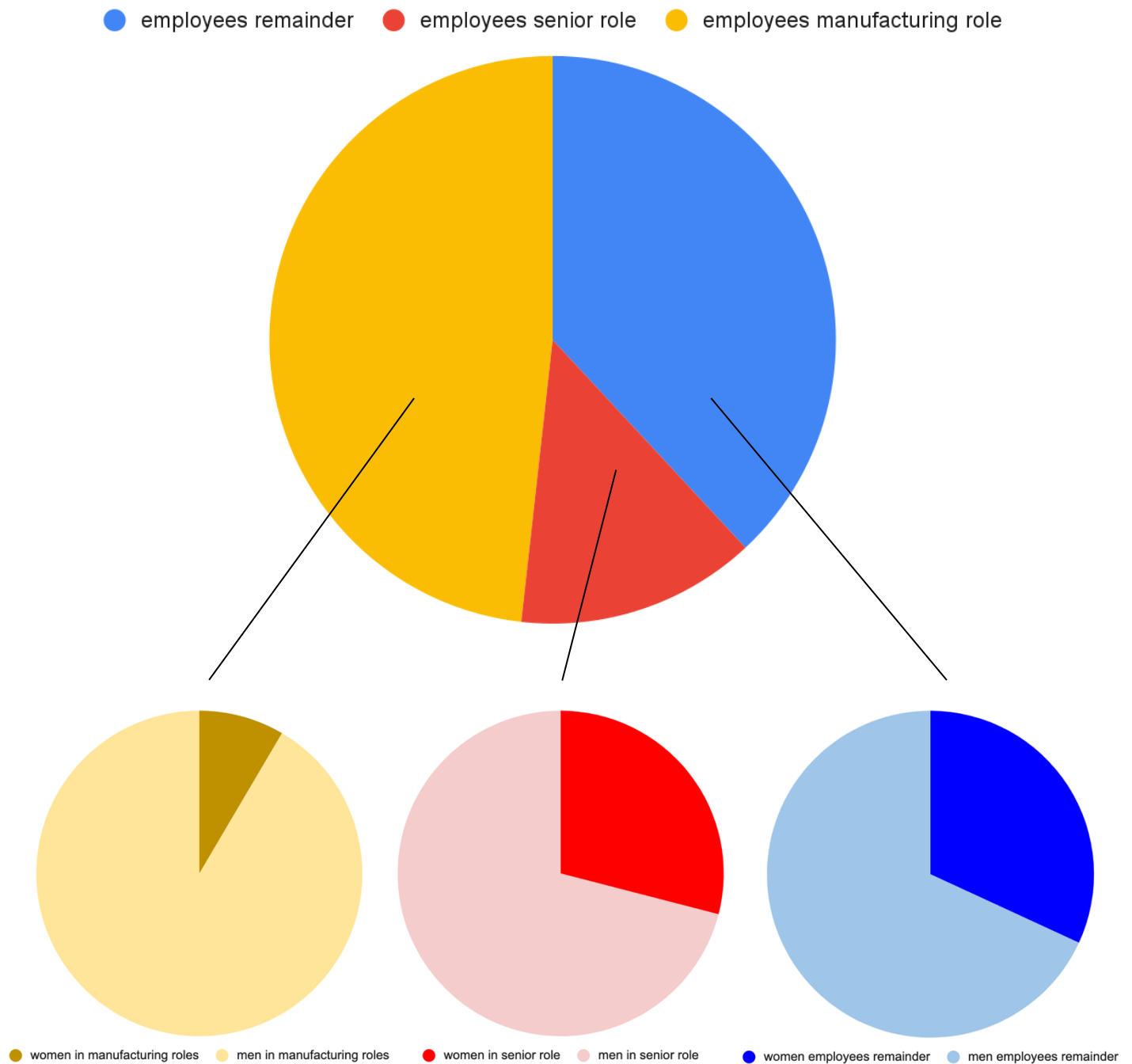


Figure 3 Proportions of people employed in different roles (top) showing senior role (124; 13.7%), manufacturing role (437; 48.2%), and remainder (345, 38.1%). Within each of these roles, the proportion of women employed was 8.5% in manufacturing roles (bottom left), 29% in senior roles (bottom centre), and 32% remainder (bottom right).

Proportion of women employed

Across all businesses, 20% (n=183) of the workforce were women (median 23%, range 6-57%). The mean proportion of women employed within a business was 25% (min 6%; max 57%).

Women employed in any roles outside senior management or manufacturing ('remainder') represented 31.9% (n=110) of the total workforce (Figure 3).

Proportion of women working at a senior level

Across all businesses, 29% (n=36) of employees with a senior role were women (Figure 3). Within businesses, the percentage of women with a senior role was a median of 50%, ranging from 0 (four business) to 100% (one business). The majority of businesses (n=12) had 41-50% senior roles fulfilled by women (Figure 4).

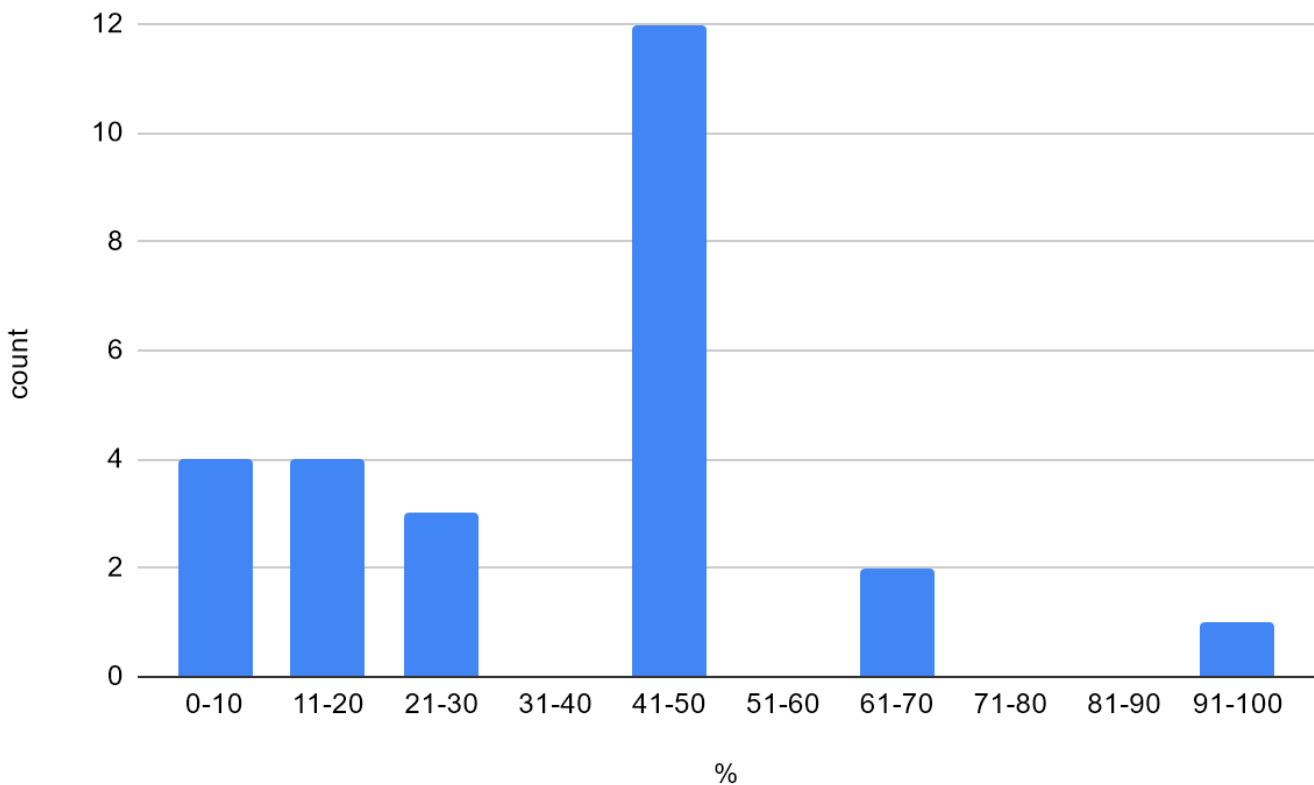


Figure 4 Distribution of proportions of women employed in senior roles across 27 businesses grouped into 10% classes.

Proportion of women directly employed in manufacturing

Across all businesses, of the 437 people employed directly in manufacturing, only 37 (8.5%) were women. Within individual businesses, the mean proportion of women employed in manufacturing was 14% (median 6%, range 0-50%). Only one business reached 50% the proportion of women employed in manufacturing, while eight businesses reported 0% women employed in manufacturing.

Perceptions of Gender Inclusivity

Among all individual respondents, the majority (93%) believed that their place of work was gender inclusive, with the remainder answering 'Maybe' or 'No' (both 3.5%).

Respondents were asked to rate gender equality for a range of specific issues in their workplace using scores from 1-5, where 1='POOR' and 5='EXCELLENT'. Overall, most respondents rated all seven issues as 'GOOD' or 'EXCELLENT' (median score 4 or better). See Table 1. Diversity in senior leadership was scored lowest among the seven issues, with 18% scoring less than 'AVERAGE' (score 3) and 57% scoring greater than 'Average'.

Table 1 Gender equality ratings for specific issues in the workplace by individual respondents.

	Median Score	Min Score	Max Score	% scored below 'Average'	% scored above 'Average'
Zero tolerance of discriminatory behaviour	5	1	5	4	89
Equal promotion opportunities	5	1	5	4	86
Accessible restrooms /loos	4	1	5	7	68
Inclusive leadership	4	2	5	4	79
Cultural sensitivity	4	1	5	11	71
Diverse teams/working groups	4	1	5	7	71
Diverse senior leadership	4	1	5	18	57

Comments about gender inclusivity

Respondents were provided with an opportunity to comment generally about gender inclusivity in their workplace.

'We have complete gender equality. Its [sic] being able to do the job that counts.'

There were several positive comments from employers about their attitudes to the recruitment of a gender diverse team, indicating an encouraging level of engagement with inclusivity in their workplaces.

'We really would welcome more female employees on our factory floor and every role is open for anyone to apply to.'

'I believe we employ the best people who apply for the jobs.'

'We recruit based on skillset and suitability for the role. Gender is not a restrictive or deciding factor for us.'

'We are led by a female and encourage female applicants positively through the recruitment process.'

However, this was countered by comments about applications from the workforce, including:

'We have hardly any female applicants for roles.'

'It is rare that any apply for the position.'

'Very difficult to find female staff with cabinet making and joinery skills.'

Some employers were keen to employ more women in manufacturing roles. However, promoting apprenticeships and manufacturing roles to women appears to be a very mixed picture, ranging from completely engaged and proactive to having *'no initiatives to increase diversity or equality across manufacture or design'*.

A response from one woman maker provides an important perspective of her lived experience rather than an observation by an employer. She describes the workplace as:

'Inclusive but as a woman I still feel disadvantaged - although they don't mean it to happen. Apart from me, women are only in admin roles.'

Conclusions

We are very pleased to receive 28 responses to our first gender diversity survey, representing 954 people employed. We set out to build evidence to support the development of a programme that addresses some of the challenges and celebrates the successes.

The results matched with our expectations, based on anecdotal evidence, that the industry is not gender diverse. Across all three groups, senior leadership, manufacturing and other roles, women are in the minority.

We were particularly interested in the data around women employed in making or manufacturing roles, and were not surprised to learn that the average was only 8.5%. Whilst one company stands out for having a 50:50 balanced team, it was disappointing that eight companies (29% of total respondents) had no women at all.

The proportion of women in senior leadership roles was 29%, much higher than in manufacturing. The data shows a complete range from 100% women leaders in one company, to none in four companies. Whilst this shows a stark difference, it was pleasing to see that the majority of those had between 41%-50% women in senior roles.

Open questions that focussed on perceptions of gender inclusivity were predominantly answered in the positive. Reflecting on the survey data and that respondents were typically employers, it would be very

interesting to ask the same questions of individual women. Indeed, our intention is to repeat this survey on an annual basis, and in future to invite responses directly from individual employees alongside those from employers.

The key themes evident in the general comments about gender inclusivity were mostly about recruitment. We heard that employers had a positive attitude to employing a gender diverse team of makers, and that they recruit on the basis of skills and ability to do the job. However, there is clearly more to be done to promote the roles specifically to women and to also make them attractive.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to all the respondents to this 2023 survey who freely gave their time to contribute to our research.

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- Dr Gabriel Hemery, Chief Executive, Sylva Foundation
- Dr Lynn Jones, Furniture Industry Recruiter and former University Department Manager
- Phoebe Oldfield, Wood School graduate and Designer/Maker at Benchmark Furniture
- Rae Sellen, Designer-Maker in wood
- Hattie Speed, This Girls Makes, Designer and Maker of Furniture

References and Further reading

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