



The ICAC Recorder

International Cotton Advisory Committee



Special Issue: Women's Voices

• Adriana Calderan Gregolin	2	• Kim Kitchings.....	25
• Andrea Giraldo.....	5	• La Rhea Pepper	27
• Collette Traoré.....	7	• María Fernanda Burneo Sevilla	29
• Doris Phiri	11	• Dr Ouattara Gniré Mariam.....	31
• Eimear McDonagh	13	• Maysa Motta Gadelha.....	33
• Elke Hortmeyer	15	• Rabia Sultan	35
• Dr Eleni Tsaliki	17	• Renée Anderson	37
• Francisca Gomes Vieira	19	• Rhea Wakefield.....	39
• Hayley Morgan.....	21	• Shelley Butler Barlow	41
• Karina Edith Mendoza Garza.....	23	• Sujata Saxena	43

Men till the land but women know the seed. It is widely believed that agriculture evolved largely due to women. While men hunted, women carried out the important job of gathering seeds and selecting the best plants that produced food, animal feed and fibre. In fact, women may have been responsible for the earliest domestication of crop plants. Even in current times, it is not men, but women, who are known to be the main caretakers of farm animals and the chief custodians of soil health and agriculture around the world. Although women play such a pivotal role in crop production and animal husbandry, their contribution is often overlooked in social, economic and political spheres. Women are far less empowered than men because they face structural barriers that limit their access to land, information, finance, infrastructure, technologies, and markets.¹

Cotton farming is labour intensive in the developing world. Women do most of the work and are often severely underpaid. A study conducted by the International Trade Centre (ITC)² showed that women across the world are most commonly employed in cotton farms for picking, planting and field management. The study also highlights the fact that women are paid less than men and these gender-based wage disparities are observed in many countries. Studies show that women are discriminated against on all fronts at all levels. Women do not get their share of land ownership, access to assets or power in decision making. In a rural setting, land ownership is a source of hope, livelihood, empowerment, opportunities and dignity. Sadly, women in the farming sector lack the right to own land in more than 90 countries.³ Despite constituting half of the global population — of which more than 400 million women are farmers who produce the majority of the world's food — women own less than 20% of the land.³ The United Nations Food and agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates farm land ownership of women to be as low as 10%.⁴ Depriving women of land ownership also deprives them of empowerment as well as social and economic security.

Women constitute only 25.3% of employment in agriculture.⁵ They form about 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries (FAO 2011)⁶. About 59% of employed women in sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in informal agricultural employment (UN Women 2015)⁷. Not surprisingly, women also constitute 70% of the financially insecure population in the world.⁸ A recent report⁸ shows that the gender gap, which is currently at 78% in 'political participation', has widened recently, driven by negative trends in some large countries, counterbalancing the progress made in 98 smaller countries. The report also highlights a 42% gender gap in 'economic participation and opportunity' and estimates that it could take another 267.6 years to close the wage gap. The report shows that 'the proportion of women among skilled professionals continues to increase, as does the progress towards wage-equality. Another contributing factor to the wage gap is a general lack of women in leadership positions, with women representing just 27% of all managerial positions'. Further, only 22% of rural women in low-income countries hold bank accounts (World Bank 2015).⁹ These are serious challenges that are difficult to overcome due to deeply entrenched patriarchal values prevalent in much of the world. Women empowerment is also hindered due to discriminatory social norms and practices, traditions, customs, cultural beliefs and religious tenets that exist in many parts of the world. Many societies follow traditions that often hinder women from participating in political or economic settings. Women are also excluded from decision-making and opportunities regarding social development.

The contribution of women as workers, managers and leaders at home and on the farm is neither remunerated nor acknowledged appropriately. Much of their contribution goes unnoticed, especially in rural societies. It might be at a snail's pace, but times are changing. Women in many parts of the world are asserting their rights. The world is becoming increasingly aware of the fact that empowered women not only benefit society but also catalyse its growth. A study showed that the total agricultural output in Africa could increase by up to 20% if women's access to agricultural inputs were equal to men's (DFID 2010).⁶ The need to work toward mainstreaming of gender equity has become more pertinent in current times than ever before.

Women are supposedly revered and even worshipped in many societies. However, they continue to face the consequences of discriminatory practices that deprive them of ownership, education, equal rights, respectability, equality, equity and dignity. In fact, some societies across the world still suffer from issues like domestic violence, dowry demands and female infanticide.

Religions, cultures and societies across the world might have evolved differently but no one can disagree with the simple fact that women shape the world's future. This issue of the ICAC RECORDER is dedicated to women. It records their voices and it documents their resilience and their many successes. I would like to thank my colleagues — Ms Lorena Ruiz, Ms Parkhi Vats, Ms Caroline Taco, and Dr Sandhya Kranthi — for conducting interviews with women leaders in the cotton sector across the world. As the Editor of the ICAC RECORDER, I generally look at technical content, but this special issue has given me a very different experience — that of inspiration and hope. Dear reader, I earnestly hope that the interviews will inspire you as much as they have inspired me.

– Keshav Kranthi

1) <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/agriculture/un-plans-to-double-farmers-income-in-africa-in-three-years-59373>

2) Women in Cotton -Results of a Global survey-2011. ITC

3) <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/women-own-less-than-20-of-the-worlds-land-its-time-to-give-them-equal-property-rights/>

4) <http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/en/>

5) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS>

6) <http://www.fao.org/3/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>

7) <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2015>

8) <http://reports.weforum.org/globalgender-gap-report-2021/dataexplorer>

9) <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/04/15/massive-drop-in-number-of-unbanked-says-new-report>



Women Play an Important Role in the Textile Value Chain, from Production to Consumption

Adriana Calderan Gregolin

Regional coordinator of the project + Cotton
FAO Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

<http://www.fao.org/in-action/programa-brasil-fao/proyectos/sector-algodonero/es/>



Adriana Calderan Gregolin graduated in Agronomic Engineering at the University of Brasilia (UnB); Master in Agricultural Sciences at UnB, MBA in Public Management and Fiscal Responsibility at the Escuela Superior Abierta de Brazil, Specialist in Agroecology from Berkely University, and Cooperativism in UnB. She has worked in the Agrarian Reform Support Working Group - GTRA/UnB between 2000-2004, in the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) until 2013, supporting the National Rural Extension Policy (Pnater), especially the implementation of the Diversification Program in Areas Cultivated with Tobacco. Likewise, she has worked in Universities and NGOs as an expert in rural areas, combating poverty and sustainable development. Since 2013, she has served as Regional Coordinator of the project+ Cotton, carried out in 2013 by FAO, ABC/MRE, and seven partner countries.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges that you faced.

My professional journey is intense and full of challenges because we are in 'pandemic mode', working from home, managing personal and professional matters in the same environment. Nevertheless, I seek to comply with a routine of working hours to move forward with the established agendas. If, on the one hand, it is challenging to work from home for a year and a half, on the other, it gives me peace of mind because I can take care of my three children and the house as well.

Another critical challenge is to frequently articulate the cotton agenda with a cooperation project with countries, especially ministries of agriculture, given the crisis contexts facing the Covid-19 pandemic in recent times, not to mention the cotton sector crisis in recent years in Latin American countries (except for Brazil). All this generates an unfavorable environment for technical and financial initiatives and support from governments to the sector.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment you're proud of.

I have been coordinating the project + Cotton regionally since 2013. Thus, I have evaluated the fact that I have established this 'program' in the region and mobilized six countries to resume cotton production on a more sustainable basis, repositioning

the item on the governments' agenda, all together with a dedicated team at regional and country levels.

Do you have any role models, and how did they inspire you?

My first reference as a woman and worker was my maternal grandmother, a woman farmer who came from Italy and settled in southern Brazil, was a mother to 13 children, and raised the family working in the fields — with little to no technology — from 1940-1960. Her history inspires me. She lived until she was 92 years old. I learned from her that the dignity of women and men farmers reflects in their ability to produce under climatic risks despite the lack of public policies or infrastructure in the countryside, lack of services and public goods. I believe that rural people can still build the future for many others.

My professional career includes family farming, public policies and international cooperation. The history of women farmers like my grandmother and mother is my inspiration. That is why I work to move the countryside toward the effective inclusion of rural women, including cotton women.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to women just starting their careers in cotton?

The cotton sector is a sea of opportunities. Professionals can work and contribute all through the value chain links, including

planning and analysis, to bring innovations in the market and to create new niche markets and novel value additions. After all, the cotton chain requires a uniquely different vision of women in the cotton business. Moreover, the cotton chain needs repositioning globally, renewing, adjusting to the Sustainable Development Goals, reinventing itself as an income- and livelihood-generating opportunity for millions of people worldwide.

What role do women have in the cotton sector?

Women play roles in all cotton value chain links, from production to consumption. In the project + Cotton, we have women producers, artisans, researchers, extension workers, entrepreneurs, social mobilizers, activists, students, teachers ... a group of women acting in all-cotton sector areas, bringing their sensitivity toward innovative business models, contributing to the sector's transformation from an innovative, inclusive and sustainable perspective.

Have you confronted gender bias?

There are many diverse challenges in the cotton sector that all women face, whether in rural or urban areas. The first barrier is the 'obligation' to prove that we can serve on different fronts of the cotton chain that men have traditionally occupied. Notably, as the coordinator of a regional cotton cooperation initiative, my desire to implement the programme in compliance of the mission and commitment that FAO and the Brazilian Cooperation Agency envisioned, has overcome the gender resistance found in the organisations.

Are you part of major decision-making in your workplace?

Occupying a staff position in the FAO structure, I have the opportunity to contribute by giving gender work the importance it deserves in general and specifically in the +Cotton Initiative, which is reflected in a set of actions aimed at providing value, recognition, inclusion and listening to women in the sector.

How have you personally contributed to setting the gender imbalance right?

I evaluated my contribution to the extent to which we incorporate affirmative actions in the implementation of +Cotton regarding the participation of women in the project actions. In addition, we collected information and studied the situation of women in the cotton sector in five cooperation partner countries, which provided us the elements to develop a gender plan of action together with the organisations implementing the Project in the partner countries.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve the contributions of women in cotton?

Move forward in establishing an action with UN Women. On the one hand, there is an apparent demand for support from the cotton women; on the other, this organisation has an

outstanding accumulated experience that may converge to strengthen women in the sector.

Five tips for building up and supporting women at your workplace

1. Support each other as women to move forward for equal rights.
2. Continue to develop an attitude of valuing and recognising women in their leadership positions.
3. Encourage women to apply to leadership positions so a more equitable work environment occurs within institutional guidelines.
4. Promote the participation of our rural women in the participatory building of initiatives and actions towards the sector. Women know from their experience what is necessary for the industry from the perspective of social inclusion.
5. Protect women's and girls' rights.

How did COVID-19 affect women?

In the poorest rural territories, women took on the challenges and restrictions to feed their children. They also looked for new alternatives to generate income, demonstrating their power of adaptation, resilience to maintain life and work amid a global crisis.

What does the future for women in the cotton sector look like?

There is a future for opportunities related to sustainable-certified cotton, with traceability, for markets that value-differentiated and socially inclusive products.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women employees?

I could mention two examples: the building of the Gender Equality and Interculturality Policy of the Paraguayan Public Agrarian sector launched in 2017 and the 2020 National Agricultural Strategy for Rural Women in Ecuador. These are important advances to the extent that they support other actions in favour of better positioning of women in society in terms of rights and access to government policies.

What other policies should the Government implement?

From my point of view, all government policies should incorporate a gender perspective in their implementation and it should be translated into affirmative action.

What is the one thing that you would like to see for an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?

Equal pay for men and women. There are developed or developing countries wherein the difference in salary received by women to men in the same positions could reach 25%.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC

Household responsibilities also continue to be a challenge, as they are rooted in the perception that they belong to women.

How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers?

The private sector plays a strategic role in gender equality to the extent that it becomes a partner in training actions, establishes articulated business plans and develops managerial skills for women, among others. The former generates a positive cycle that will strengthen all links in the cotton chain, including the industry. Thus, it is a win-win process.

What can an international organisation do to recognise and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

At a practical level, implementing projects and actions in the field, training and promoting joint reflection and planning with women and men to develop the awareness that even with physiological differences, there is a need for equity of responsibilities and rights. Strengthening coordination and joint actions with UN Women and other organisations working in the sector to build the path to equality.



Job Performance Does Not Depend on Gender

Andrea Giraldo

Head of Dyeing and Finishing, CREDITEX, Peru
agiraldo@creditex.com.pe



Andrea Giraldo is a Colombian professional with a degree in Textile Engineering and Technology. She has more than 26 years of experience managing textile dyeing and finishing areas, allowing her to acquire extensive knowledge about fabric preparation, continuous dyeing, exhaustion dyeing, yarn dyeing, printing, finishing, chemical, and quality laboratories. In addition, Andrea manages continuous improvement tools, quality management systems, lean manufacturing, emphasising problem analysis, resource management, profit generation and evaluation of results, and implementation of continuous improvement projects. She is currently studying for an MBA with a specialisation in digital transformations at the University of Rioja.

Describe your professional journey, the challenges that you faced as a woman and how you resolved them?

I am a 46-year-old Colombian textile professional and I have worked for five years as Head of Dyeing in the Peruvian Textile industry. Previously, I worked for 21 years at the Textile Coltejer Company in Medellín, Colombia, starting in the Technical Division, and later I was in charge of managing the dyeing area.

It is difficult for a woman to become a working group leader in the textile industry, where most middle and top managers are older men. People often think that women are weak and motherly when making decisions, seek attention and even confuse work and personal issues. To overcome this notion, I worked hard to earn a reputation and image as a professional, with solid technical and administrative knowledge and exemplary behaviour based on respect for others.

Tell us about your main professional accomplishment.

During my tenure at Coltejer, we developed a digitised camouflage textile for the Colombian Armed Forces. The military forces and the textile industry of my country carried out this project.

Do you have any role models, and how did they inspire you?

Dr. Luis Bernardo Botero Sanin, former Technical Director of Coltejer and my boss, was my role model. His dedication and

commitment to developing the textile industry and his professional honesty inspired me.

What is your advice to other women who start their working career?

What any professionals should do is work hard every day and pursue their dreams no matter how many barriers are in the way, and in that journey, treat all people with respect, without any difference, as they would like themselves to be treated.

What is the role of women in the textile sector?

Women have significant roles in the textile sector because we have different skills than men, leading us to greater detail, organisation, management and other skills such as leadership and commitment. As a result, we are strong, resilient and persistent, and possess critical strengths that hold us in good stead in such a demanding sector.

Have you ever confronted gender bias, and how did you deal with it?

In the two companies where I have worked, I have had the opportunity to be the first woman to assume the position of Head of Dyeing. That has not been easy at the time when they evaluated the candidates to take this assignment. However, with my work, I have shown that I can do as well or better than other colleagues and that job performance does not depend on gender but goes far beyond the difference based on outdated

thoughts. Today we are in an era where we have equal rights and duties.

Are you part of the decision-making process in your workplace?

Yes, I belong to the Technical Management working group in charge of the company's manufacturing. Being part of this group implies that I have to make decisions at the technical, programming, quality, and sample development levels that directly affect the company's performance.

How have you personally contributed to correcting gender imbalance?

I pass on my personal experiences to the women I have and have had the opportunity to work with. I encourage them to grow without gender limits so that their status as excellent professionals and individuals can prevail before any other barrier comes their way.

What else do you personally want to do to improve the contribution of women in the textile sector?

I want to contribute to the Textile Industry by improving skills and promoting research in the region. Right now, my short-term goal is to complete my MBA.

Five tips for building up and supporting women at your workplace.

1. Allow household women to learn the art of clothing, and through sustainability projects, provide them with by-products of the textile industry to create different products.
2. Raise the self-esteem of women through job empowerment courses.
3. Create a transparent work environment in all companies, in which promotions depend on workers' demonstrated abilities, regardless of their gender.
4. Establish a non-harassment policy of any kind to women in their workplace.
5. Promote women's achievements in their work centres.

How did Covid-19 affect women in your sector and what has been done to mitigate the effects?

Covid-19 does not distinguish sex, race, and age. It affects us all equally. Thus, remote and digital work is an excellent option to protect ourselves from this pandemic.

What is the future of women in the textile and apparel industry?

The future is promising because we now see more female participation in the sector. Moreover, we are given the opportunity to show our mettle, who we are and what we are worth.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women employees?

Policies for gender equality and prevention of work harassment are commonplace.

What additional policies do you think the Government should implement to reduce gender imbalance?

The Government must work closely with the community, teaching fundamental values from childhood and strengthening equality and respect for all people, races and genders.

How can the cotton industry invest in creating careers for women?

Investing in education is essential. There are many programs for leadership and emotional intelligence. There is a need to create virtual working opportunities for working mothers or to provide childcare facilities at workplace.

What can an international organisation do to recognise and facilitate the reduction of gender bias?

International organisations have a vital role in reducing gender bias. Globally, progressive minds have been doing their best to remove barriers of all kinds such as gender, race and age to create equal opportunities. Opportunities are needed and it will be up to each human being, male or female, to take advantage of them and demonstrate their capabilities for societal enhancement. But in addition to opportunities, the pedagogical tools are fundamental to removing the cultural differences that were created centuries ago — and shouldn't even exist now.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Self-esteem and Self-worth Are Very Important for Our Empowerment

Collette Traoré

Association Femmes de Tissage Traditionnel (AFATT) Segou, Mali (workshop partner: Ethical Fashion Mali Project of ITC, funded by the EU trust fund for Africa)
www.aaaacoop.com



Collette Traoré is a Mali-based entrepreneur in spinning, weaving and Bogolan decorations in 100% organic cotton handmade textiles. Mrs Traore is an accomplished entrepreneur and master craftswoman, mentor and trainer in all professional aspects of the artisanal cotton processing value chain. She is the first businesswoman venturing into the textile trades, which had been exclusively reserved for men, such as weaving and traditional painting on cotton fabric 'bogolan'. She is an expert in local manufacture technologies (Indian-type spinning wheel — Charkha, manual hand looms, ancestral practices of traditional bogolan painting). Mrs Traore is the founder and the President of The Women's Association of Traditional Weaving Craftswomen (in French, 'Association des Femmes Artisanes de Tissage Traditionnel' (AFATT)), and a partner of the ITC's Ethical Fashion Project in Mali. AFATT and ITC launched the AAAA Brand in 2019, connecting 150 young women in e-commerce.

Tell us your professional journey and the challenges that you had to face.

I am a craftswoman and community leader, committed to the emergence of women as citizens. I founded a cooperative economy with social and mutual support (solidarity), 'Association of Women Artisans of Traditional Weaving', located in Segou, Mali. AFATT's mission is to create jobs for women through the development of craftsmanship to ensure their economic independence, a guarantee for greater empowerment and decision-making power.

Women face daily challenges in a male-dominated society with jobs 'gendered' for women, and they're often difficult and poorly paid. Therefore, we are continuously negotiating to reconcile the time of the women, to gain more time toward 'productive' roles that offer income rather than multiple 'socio-cultural' and 'unproductive' positions assigned to them by men. Managing the balance between productivity for survival and empowerment and 'natural reproduction' remains another great challenge. We are currently using 'smart' negotiation to eventually increase incomes to reflect the more productive labour and this approach seems to work. In my experience, economic constraints that ensure more income and women's contribution to the family welfare have prevailed.

How do you plan to continue your legacy?

My collaboration with the Ethical Fashion Project of ITC, financed by the European Union, and the launch of the AAAA

brand (www.aaaacoop.com) in interior design, are giving great visibility to women and young people as I transfer a lot of my knowledge and skills to young people. The project aims to connect talented but marginalised artisans to the international marketplace. Our partnership with the Dutch social enterprise Atelier SUKHA has brought awareness to women about the value of their artistic creations and, thanks to social networks, customers are appreciating our work. Self-esteem and self-worth are very important for our empowerment.

The delegation of the European Union in Mali gave me a lot of visibility and I was awarded 'Femme Entrepreneur Championne' during the Women's Month in an event organized by the EU in Mali on 08 March 2021. (https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Znw_0qyxPIY)

Where do you draw your inspiration from?

I have always been inspired by Nyéléni, a legendary woman from my region of Ségou. Nyéléni is a symbol in West Africa. Her story is famous and there are many songs about her accomplishments in the region. She is famous because she managed to become a champion in the male-dominated world of agriculture. She lived many decades ago. She was an excellent farmer, an inspirational speaker and above all, she stood up against male domination that excluded women from the basic activities of agriculture, which allowed men to impose their will on the rest of the family. She naturally became the symbol of women's resistance. Nyéléni inspires me and all the women of Ségou and Mali.

What advice would you give to other women who are starting their career?

My first advice is that women should feel competent and truly committed to their own ambitions. They need to set goals and be determined to achieve them with honesty and real commitment, without deception. They need to be an example and know how to negotiate to avoid conflicts, because when conflicts arise, women are always 'culturally wrong'. As mothers, women are automatically assigned the role of maintaining social cohesion even if they have to endure violence and injustice.

What role do women in general play in the cotton value chain?

In general, women roles are assigned by the social division of labour. For example, in the long weaving process, women are assigned very hard and poorly paid jobs, consisting of the preparatory processes, such as spinning, winding, washing, dyeing, preparing ingredients and long walks to the market etc., prior to weaving. These jobs are for apprentices. Therefore, a woman remains an apprentice her whole life, without ever being promoted to less arduous and better-paid jobs that are close to the finish line of a product, where the most value addition is concentrated and in which the quality of women's work upstream is also included. Salaries are low and payment is very slow. However, the young generation of women will change these things, although cooperation is also required by men. When women coordinate projects, they listen better to the women who are the beneficiaries and that's where ITC, with Mode Éthique, has made a difference. In comparison, many of the previous projects did not generate such good results because of a vision through men's eyes that seem to create a gender-based coup throughout the world.

How do you deal with gender bias in your profession?

Prejudices, stereotypes and marginalisation of women are a common phenomenon. Meetings that discuss these issues and tasks performed by women without any women present are frequent. It is so common that men do not even realise it. Therefore, strategies are needed to raise awareness and we, as women, are asking for consultation and dialogue in the decision-making process regarding co-responsibility in customer order processing and delivery times, thus allowing the traceability of each person's tasks. Tools for working groups, such as WhatsApp, including audio in different languages for illiterate women are important and helpful. Most women are illiterate because our families did not facilitate our education, because of school dropout, pregnancies, early marriages and young women abandoned by emigrating men.

Do you participate in important decisions in your workplace?

Yes, I am at the heart of all activities in the organisation. I coordinate training, management of orders and payments of suppliers. I also ensure the quality of the partnership with ITC as well as national and international buyers and clients. Thanks

to the technical assistance of ITC, I learned marketing and how to manage the business, and platforms such as WhatsApp and smart phones which were very useful during the Covid-19 pandemic, allowing exchanges between us artisans, the regional teams in Mali and the exchange groups. Women need access to Internet and online trading in local languages. During the pandemic, it was the National Marketplace that greatly contributed to our resilience to the brutal and unprecedented effects.

How have you personally contributed to correcting the gender imbalance?

Yes. A lot of efforts to address the problem of gender bias were done through the promotion of roundtables and dialogue working groups. The strategy of the Textile Incubator with ITC focussed on coaching, mentoring and tutoring which made possible the recognition of the talent of each and every individual, allowing them to freely choose their working group. National and international senior trainers helped to select objective criteria to master practices and performance in terms of quality and quantity for economic sustainability and competitiveness in accordance with market standards, which has reduced the imbalance. Knowledge and know-how linked to concrete results are difficult to contest when transparency, fairness and ethics are the basic values accepted by all collaborating parties.

What else can be done to improve the contribution of women in textiles?

Formalise the civic advancement of women allowing them to emerge from the informal sector, where their great contributions to wealth creation in their neighbourhoods, villages, towns, regions and countries are invisible. According to statistics, women produce 80% of the wealth and benefit from only 15% of it. In the cotton sector, women occupy and contribute along the entire chain, from cotton fields to the finished products. However, they remain the poorest and the most excluded. Women need access to land, raw materials, ordinary credit for microentrepreneurs for a sustainable business exceeding the amount of micro-credit limit of \$150, normal banking, subsidies for their self-employed start-ups (at least \$10,000), traceability of their products that tell the story of their empowerment, daily struggle, determination, ambition, development and strength of character like mine.

Five tips to empower and support women in your workplace

1. Encourage ambition and determination
2. Teach time management and how to balance multiple socio-cultural tasks
3. Explain the importance of negotiation and how to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes
4. Assume high-visibility positions in groups via social networks (WhatsApp discussion group)
5. Promote participation in political, economic and social decision-making bodies (24-hour women's voice)

How has Covid-19 affected women and what can be done to effectively mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the textile business?

With the Covid-19 pandemic, artisanal businesses owned by women went from a slowdown in production to a total standstill due to difficulties in selling their products, not to mention problems with the supply of raw materials that made production impossible. These two situations have largely contributed to the impoverishment of actors in the handicraft sector in Mali. Orders at all levels have become rare or non-existent.

Craftswomen, in all the trades, have seen the sales figures fall in companies they built with their own hands and dedication. Today, because of this pandemic, they cannot benefit from their work.

Women artisans are very creative and dynamic:

- Train women on e-commerce by analysing the entire process, including advertising on social networking platforms to attract customers, strengthen communication with customers, receive orders, respect production standards in accordance with customers' requirements, and agree on a means of payment before shipping the order either by land or air.
- Create concept stores and stores with shelves presenting the different products crafted by women according to their trades.
- Create labels and brands made by women with eco-friendly traceability, that are respectful of the environment and climate change, that are broadcasting messages of protection against Covid-19, and Covid-19 vaccinations for all. Women artisans must manufacture masks for themselves, their businesses, their families, their communities and the most vulnerable.

What does the future look like for women in your sector?

I see an uncertain future for the sector and for women, where precariousness will remain due to lack of support for recovery during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. I heard that other governments around the world have given a lot of subsidies to their companies, especially the smaller ones. The future will depend on how high the younger generations of craftswomen will carry the flame of ambition. I hope they will. They are lucky to have e-commerce and new information technologies to move forward very quickly. The younger generations will have the chance to move faster toward empowerment. This is one of the opportunities created by the pandemic, and all of the partners' recovery plans seem to have recognised this need for women's trade.

Unfortunately, ITC's Ethical Fashion Project is coming to an end in February 2022, at a time when women artisans need to be supported during and after this Covid-19 pandemic and to maximise the lessons learned from the pandemic. Since 2012, Mali has experienced multiple crises in security, political stability and health with the pandemic. Despite those challenges,

women have achieved great results, but they still need to be strengthened.

What policies has the government adopted to benefit women craftswomen?

We noted the absence of support from the government of Mali and financial institutions to the initiatives of craftswomen and artisans of Mali. The year 2020 has not been a successful year for craft companies despite the support of some partners such as the ITC Ethical Fashion Project, UNDP-Mali, UN Women, the TSAM Project, the NGO RAC and its partners in informal education who ordered handwashing kits and masks.

What kind of policies do you think the government should implement?

There is a need for policies and plans to revive micro-enterprises, 80% of which are run by women, and to help with the implementation of administrative formalisation of their business.

- Recognition of women's non-academic knowledge, a heritage to be passed on to the youngest, which remains in the hands and heads of women. Those skills must be rejuvenated because the high potential of women's creativity in the textile arts of Mali is disappearing.
- Register and license women's creations to protect their intellectual property against piracy and take steps against certain partners who tend to subcontract the visibility of the creations of women.
- Support the creation of web platforms and social networks to increase the visibility of women's creations and their knowledge.
- To support through subsidies the economic rights of women and their equal participation in all political, economic and cultural instances.

Name one thing you would like to see changed immediately to remedy gender inequality.

Recognise women's knowledge and skills and identify them. Create a special catalogue that gives them intellectual property rights and no longer stereotypes women as illiterate in foreign languages. Recognise the mother tongue (native language) everywhere since this language is the best tool for self-development.

How can the cotton industry invest in the career development of women?

There is a need for several actions:

- Recognising the role of women along the artisanal cotton processing value chain.
- Recognising women's crafts and their contribution to social, economic and cultural development.
- Supporting capacity building, creating attractive skills and real prospects for creating sustainable employment for women.

- Supporting ecosystems that value the dialogue between the artisanal manufacturing industry and cotton industry, which must recognise and respect the designs and intellectual property of craftswomen in the production and creation of fashion and accessories.

What can an international organisation do to recognise gender bias and facilitate its reduction?

An international organisation must choose its human resources carefully, be sensitive to the contexts in which they work

and be alert to the dynamics that reproduce and perpetuate prejudices against women. Males predominate almost everywhere in organisations and in the high decision-making roles. In my opinion, the main prejudice is failing to recognise the knowledge and skill in a local context, giving oneself the role of knowledge provider. Incidentally, this kind of prejudice in an international organisation can amplify the local prejudices, preventing their reduction and elimination.





The Future of Women in the Cotton Sector is Very Bright

Doris Phiri

Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Cotton Association of Zambia
www.cottonzambia.org



Doris Phiri holds a degree in Economics and International Trade. She has a certificate in Monitoring and Evaluation from the University of Zambia. Ms Phiri is currently working for the Cotton Association of Zambia as a Monitoring and evaluation officer also doubling up with the Gender and Business Development activities where she works with various women empowerment programs with a focus on value addition in cotton. Ms. Phiri has been working in the cotton industry for close to three years now. She enjoys working with women and youths which gives her great joy and a feeling of satisfaction.

Tell us the story of your professional journey; the challenges that you faced as a woman and if you resolved them, how did you do it.

I am a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer working for the Cotton Association of Zambia. I am also in charge of the business development of the association where I focus on working with rural women in cotton to add value to their cotton through weaving and spinning. The major challenges that I have faced so far working with rural farmers is having to address elderly people and offer lessons to them. The main challenge to be honest was with me thinking that they won't respect me, because I was a woman, and in most cases younger than them. But the more I interacted with them the more I gained confidence and with time I was able to address them properly and without fear.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments .

Working with women in rural areas and helping them form groups of weaving and spinning that help increase their income brings me great joy. My biggest accomplishment in this sector so far has been linking these women groups to financial institutions that have helped in terms of financial inclusion where these women now own bank accounts. Some women even own businesses of mini-booths operations/mobile money and they are able to bring these services offered by the bank closer to the community members.

Do you have any role models, and how did they inspire you?

My role model, I can say, was my boss the late Mr Joseph Nkole who inspired me through his vast knowledge of the cotton industry. His vision for the industry gave us hope for a prosperous cotton sector in Zambia. It is my desire to get to know the industry as much as he did and be able to explore the various value chains and continue his vision in creation a successful textile industry in Zambia.

What advice would you give to other women who are beginning their careers in cotton?

I would like to advise all women joining the sector to come in with an open mind — one that is ready to explore the various value chains in cotton, as the cotton industry is a very vast industry, in which we as women have a special role to play to be successful and stand out.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, I am part of the management team and I also take the lead in organising women activities which gives me an upper hand in influencing what we can do better in terms of women in the sector.

How have you personally contributed to setting the gender imbalance right in your sector?

I advocate for equal participation of women in all activities and when organising trainings and workshops I make sure 50% or more of the invited guest are women.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women in cotton?

I would like to continue educating women on their rights. I will strive to increase their literacy levels in rural areas by connecting them to institutions that offer services of adult literacy. I believe the high illiteracy levels also contribute to the low participation of women in many activities as they feel as if they're inferior to men.

Five tips to support women at your workplace

1. Upgrade skills
2. Capacity-building in leadership and managerial skills
3. Appointing women to higher positions that are now occupied mostly by men
4. Creating support groups where most women can voice their feelings and concerns
5. Better wages and salaries

How did COVID-19 affect women at work and what can be done to effectively mitigate the impacts of the pandemic

I noticed that most women from my workplace worked better virtually. For example, when giving presentations, many proved to be more confident on virtual platforms and I believe this improved their confidence levels. More and more women explored different avenues and reached their potential. This basically meant that some women may have been feeling

intimidated at places of work and would rather act reserved and shy. Creating a more conducive environment can bring out the potential in women.

What does the future for women in your sector look like?

The future of women in textile and cotton is actually very bright, with many job opportunities and higher positions to be occupied by women. In Zambia specifically, the textile industry has potential but it would really need huge investments that will lead to the opening of textile mills. The future of women in cotton and textiles will also be linked with the growth of the textile industry.

What steps do you suggest remedying gender discrimination?

- Encourage and increase girl child education
- Build more schools
- Increase support programmes for women and
- Increase women empowerment programmes.
- How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers?

The industry needs to invest on skills development in value addition. The cotton value chain is long and has immense potential to create more jobs for women. In Zambia specifically, there is a need to revive the textile industry as it was in the past and grow it further.

What can an international organisation do to recognise and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

International organisations are working to reduce the gender gaps. They can strengthen their gender-sensitisation programmes, empower women in different skills, promote girl/child education and adult literacy especially targeted for women.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Education Continues to Be the Best Way to Improve Gender Diversity

Eimear McDonagh

Director, Agri Direct Australia Pty Ltd
www.agridirect.com.au



During her 25 years' experience as Export Marketing Manager in the Australian cotton industry, **Eimear McDonagh** managed cotton sales, trade finance and all export supply chain activities. In addition to the markets in Southeast Asia, she was instrumental in building the Indonesian, Bangladesh and Chinese markets and developing a reputation as a long-term provider of high-quality cotton and customer service. She continues to do so in her new role with Agri Direct Australia. Eimear is a director for the Australian Cotton Shippers Association (ACSA); as a Director of the ICA, Eimear is a founding member of Women in Cotton initiative that aims to improve diversity and the role of women in the global cotton industry. Recently appointed to the Private Sector Advisory Committee for the International Cotton Advisory Council (ICAC), she works to serve the cotton community to promote knowledge sharing and innovation.

Tell us the story of your professional journey; the challenges that you faced as a woman and if you resolved them, how did you do it.

I am a woman in the global cotton industry and have been so for over 25 years now. A native of Ireland, my travels took me to the small border town of Goondiwindi in Queensland, Australia, where my cotton journey began. It has taken me around the world in my role as an export marketing manager. I faced many challenges in learning a new business and taking on the legacy of previous male executives was an interesting learning curve. Travel was always extensive and being located in Australia usually meant 10+ hour flights departing at 1:00 am and returning at similar times but dealing with different cultures was a lovely challenge and one that I still enjoy. Perhaps people expect me to comment on being one of few women to occupy this role in the past 25 years, but working in a male-dominated environment was not an unusual challenge to women who started careers when I did. The cotton industry was and still is predominantly male-dominated and it was a matter of learning the business, navigating difficult issues with common sense and building a strong skill-set in dealing with people. I gave very little thought to misogyny and had no idea of bias. If I had it had been harder for me, ignorance may have been bliss!

But now that I have learned so much about these issues, I look back aghast at some situations and know that I could have done some things differently; however, there is only value in looking to improve what is ahead.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment that you have achieved in your sector?

Apart from building new markets and growing a company brand, working on establishing the Women in Cotton group is without doubt something I am very proud of.

Do you have any role models, and how did they inspire you?

I have benefited from a generosity of spirit shown to me by many of the older generation of gentlemen that supported me in my learning; they range from colleagues, industry counterparts to agents and buyers, some of whom I still communicate with. I have role models in younger women who are fearless and have more space to express themselves and live a more balanced life than I chose to do.

What advice would you give to other women who are beginning their careers in your sector?

Learn the business from the ground up, don't insulate yourself with just your part of the business. Ask questions, remain curious and above all, enjoy what you do.

What role do women play in cotton marketing?

There is a real deficit of women in the cotton marketing sector.

It has improved considerably from when I first started but still has a long way to go.

Have you confronted gender bias and what did you specifically do to be the change it?

I have confronted gender bias many times — I just didn't always know what it was! The biggest change I feel I can make is through networks like the Women in Cotton group. Talking about and identifying where they exist throughout the global industry, then promoting women is critical to keeping the discussion alive.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, I am a director of the company.

How have you personally contributed to bridging the gender imbalance?

Having the conversation openly with men in my sector has been helpful but women still need to want to be in this sector and having a more balanced cohort the overall sector will benefit.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women to the sector?

I would like to think that I can contribute to encouraging more women to seek careers in marketing cotton and taking on more responsibility. I would like to continue to grow the Women in Cotton network. Advocate for women on association boards and support new entrants to seek advancement to leadership positions.

What does the future for women in your sector look like?

I am very hopeful that there is a new generation of women and men that value a more gender-diverse workplace and leadership team structure. I believe the future is brilliant for women who want to be part of that.

Do Government policies benefit employed women?

In Australia, Affirmative Action exists and has been beneficial from a company and individual viewpoint. In Australia the policy framework has been critical to guiding businesses to comply; continuous reporting and transparency from government through to the public sector is critical.

How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers in the cotton industry (ie, skills development, promotions, recruiting, mentorship, etc)?

I personally believe that education continues to be the best way to improve gender diversity, whether at school/university level or at corporate level. The benefits are abundantly clear. Perhaps the messaging needs to focus on the economic and social benefits that can be derived from improved gender diversity, particularly at leadership level. The UN has done tremendous work in this space but perhaps more developed markets should consider this message attributable to them.

What can an international organization do to recognize and mitigate gender bias?

Promote the positive returns for investing in gender-balanced workplace and management teams.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Women Today Contribute a Considerable Share to Economic Performance

Elke Hortmeyer

Director of Communications and International Relations, Bremen Cotton Exchange
www.baumwollboerse.de



Elke Hortmeyer received her vocational training as a trader in wholesale and foreign trade, then studied philosophy and German language and literature at the University of Cologne, graduating with a Masters degree. She has been working for the Bremen Cotton Exchange since 2001 and is currently the Director of Communications and International Relations. Ms Hortmeyer is a member of the SEEP and PSAP panels of the ICAC; the representative of the Bremen Cotton Exchange in the German Alliance for Sustainable Textiles; member of the Industry Advisory Board of the Textile Development and Marketing Department of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York; member of the Steering Committee of the Global Commodity Forum under the auspices of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development; member of the Foreign Trade Committee of the Bremen/Bremerhaven Chamber of Commerce and the current Chair of the Discover Natural Fibers Initiative (DNFI).

How has your professional journey been so far? Did you face any challenges as a woman and how did you resolve them?

My grandfather was a tea and tobacco merchant and had his own tea brand. Therefore, my roots are foreign trade with a focus on the tea trade. I completed my training as a foreign trade merchant. Then came cotton, an exciting adventure that has kept me busy for 20 years. The challenges that came may have most likely arisen from professional situations than from gender perspectives. However, the issue of gender justice is discussed on an international level with reference to sustainability, political empowerment and media coverage.

Have you had any role models, and how did they inspire you?

In fact, I would not name a special person, but I find it exciting how people pursue their goals and succeed in executing successful strategies with special skills that are often based on their personalities. Apart from possessing the required business skills many leaders display an extraordinary eloquence and communication skills that are completely independent of gender.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in your sector?

Advice of any kind is very dependent on the personality of the

person who receives it. However, I would advise newcomers to keep learning, learn quite a lot and never forget to stay curious. It is commonly reported that women have to work harder than men to achieve the same but that should not deter you.

What role do women in general play at the Bremen Cotton Exchange?

The Bremen Cotton Exchange is an international association. The sector is large and depends on the point of view. I see few differences in the positioning of men and women in the associations or political bodies in which we are active. In this respect, there are very active female representatives of interest groups or also in trade and journalism. It is possible that there is a surplus of men — for example, in textile engineering or agricultural research — areas with which we actively cooperate but I don't have any specific data to support this contention.

How have you personally contributed to setting the gender imbalance right?

At the university there was a certain imbalance here and there. In my current line of work there is hardly any gender imbalance.

What do you wish to do, personally, to improve the contribution of women in cotton?

I think that by collecting and providing data on the gender-status in the cotton industry, we can make a good contribution.

This has been discussed in SEEP — the ‘S’ stands for ‘social performance’. I think it is important to get a picture of the current situation in cotton producing countries. We can think about action plans based on the challenges and gaps the data reveal.

Five tips for building up and supporting women at your workplace

We have a female president and a surplus of female colleagues. In this respect, we might be doing a lot right. It is difficult to break it down to tips.

What does the future for women in the cotton sector?

To mention only two examples: There are NGOs that are specifically dedicated to the issue of women’s rights. On the government side, these civil societies are already receiving attention and financial support. This can possibly be expanded and placed on a broader basis. There are also programmes in the cotton business that address specific gender issues and empower women locally. This will certainly continue and take place more actively in view of the increasing awareness.

What policies has the Government enacted for the benefit of women employees?

In 1958, the Equal Rights Act came into force. Given our history, it was actually not that long ago. Since then, numerous steps have been taken in Germany to advance equal rights. Today, we see and experience more and more successful women in top positions. One in three self-employed persons in Germany is a woman. Around 700,000 companies in the SME sector are run by a female boss and the number is rising. And more than 40% of new companies are founded by women. But this does not mean that the development is finished; there are still many areas where I would not speak of equality. There is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

Is there anything that the Government needs to address to reduce the gender gap?

The prerequisite is certainly to correctly assess the gaps and significance of the effects. Women today contribute a considerable share to economic performance. However, across Europe,

women earn less than men. In Germany, the pay gap between women and men is 19%. There are some clearly defined reasons for this and this is where the government should start acting effectively.

What is the one thing that you would like to see an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?

There are many possible solutions and paths that can be taken and the situation is so complex that it is difficult to present the one single initial solution. Perhaps not a satisfactory answer but the topic is much too extensive for that.

How can the cotton industry invest in building women’s careers?

The political and NGO sector, which I focus on in part, is already well developed and sensitive in terms of gender equity. The current activities are extremely important, whether it is sessions on the topic at international conferences or working groups that discuss gender compliance issues and more research-oriented panels such as SEEP that consider social conditions in cotton producing countries. There is networking, whether it is ICA’s ‘Women in Cotton’ for the merchants or other networks. These networks must certainly be strengthened. Networks are extremely helpful, especially for the newcomers.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

According to a representative of the United Nations, not a single country in the world has yet achieved gender equality. And if things continue at the current pace, it is estimated that, it will take another 257 years before we achieve economic equality between women and men. Thus, an international organisation like ICAC has a very responsible task: namely, to monitor this development and to address it at the international and governmental level to strengthen the process of progress and to increase the speed. I recommend collecting data via working groups like SEEP, to have a neutral overview and a base for proposed action plans.





Believe in Yourself and Fight for Your Rights

Dr Eleni Tsaliki

Main Researcher, Plant Breeding and Genetic Resources Institute
Hellenic Agricultural Organization Demeter, Greece



Dr Eleni Tsaliki graduated as Agriculture Engineer with specialisation in Food Science and Technology from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH) Department of Agriculture in 1992. She embarked for her post-graduate studies at the same university in Chemistry Department, obtaining first a MSc (1997) and then a PhD degree (2002) in Chemistry. In her PhD she has studied the physicochemical properties of proteins and fibres of cotton (*Gossypium hirsutum* L.). She had taken part in EU research programs of Agriculture Department of AUTH (1992-1995) and since 1997 she worked as agriculture engineering in the former Cotton and Industrial Plants Institute of NAGREF with specialisation in cotton fibres evaluation, cotton cultivation and seed propagation. Since 2016, she is researcher at HELLENIC AGRICULTURAL ORGANIZATION DEMETER, Plant Breeding and Genetic Resources Institute. Her research activities are focused on agronomy and technology of field crops, evaluation of industrial crops varieties (cotton, tobacco, hemp, sesame), cotton and tobacco seed propagation and fibre quality evaluation. She has participated in many national and world scientific programs and is member of the International Cotton Research Association – ICRA Executive Committee. She has rich published work, has participated in scientific committees of international conferences and is a reviewer in international scientific journals.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges of working as a woman scientist

I have been involved in Greek cotton research since 1997. I am now the main researcher at the Hellenic Agricultural Organization – DEMETER. Looking back is highly emotional for me. I did not experience any gender bias. I have been lucky enough to come across excellent cotton researchers who helped me a lot through my first scientific steps and of course my family and my husband who support all my choices. I believe that hard work, flexibility and treating everyone with respect are the key elements that help you to face challenges.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments.

All my career choices have been good. I take pride in stating that I have been able to overcome challenges by communicating openly and thoughtfully taking into consideration all of the multitude of views and opinions which led to proper solutions and actions.

Have you had a role model who inspired you?

Frankly, I do not know who exactly inspired me but I always admire all of the female scientists who work hard with passion and talent and finally achieve a work-life balance.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

When I was young, it was not clear to me what I was seeking to accomplish in terms of my career. However, in my mind there was never any other option other than science. It was normal and logical that I had to follow the research path and make the choices that I did.

Did you encounter gender bias as a female researcher? How did you deal with it?

People tend to view women as less competent. As women, we need to be motivated and willing to promote ourselves because it has an implication for our own success. My motto is, 'Believe in yourself and claim for your rights', and I try to transfer it to all young students and scientists.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

In the Institute of Plant Breeding and Genetic Resources, there are 14 women in the team of 24 researchers. As the main researcher, I take part in many research programs either as coordinator or as a partner and this requires having the ability of making decisions and offering immediate solutions along with charismatic communication with many different persons.

How would you improve the contribution of women in cotton research?

I would advise all women in every field to defend their choices and ignore the obstacles in order to achieve their goals. More specifically, I wish to encourage young women to love science starting from their adolescence, work in research fields and debunk the notion that for a woman, career and family are two opposite words.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women scientists?

In recent years, the participation of women researchers in total employment in Greece was ranked 4th among the EU 28 member states (according to metrics of National Documentation Centre, 2017) reaching the 1.51% while the average of EU countries is 1.02%. Even though the number of women PhDs is the same as that of male PhD holders, the representation of women in the R&D departments of the Higher Education Sector is only 46.5%. Women comprise 43.6% of the staff in government departments while in the business enterprise sector women are only 30.4%. Therefore, special initiatives will be needed to ensure that highly skilled women advance into leadership positions in the public and private sectors.

What do you think can be done to mitigate gender inequality?

It is not just sexism alone, there are also invisible barriers that are holding women back. To achieve gender equality, the governments need to create special rules for female employees, with family-friendly policies and flexible work schedules that allow employees to set a timetable that accommodates other responsibilities such as childcare, parental care, or continuing higher education. I think that the education system, from primary to high school, must adopt gender action plans for the promotion of gender equality and strategies in order to increase the engagement of females in science.

What is the one thing that you would like to suggest to remedy gender inequality?

All forms of gender inequality need to be tackled and change the fact of the underrepresentation of women in traditionally male-dominated fields. The division of scientific work into 'female' and 'male' areas, which correspond to differentiated work schedules, job responsibilities and salaries must be reset.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

National and international organisations can take an active role in awareness campaigns and training to change attitudes and behaviours. They can also provide services to help their members to increase women's participation in science and engineering. Moreover, they can engage with their members and the business community to raise awareness of the impact of unconscious gender bias and 'male thinking' or patriarchal perspective.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



It Is Easier for Women to Work with Sustainability Because We Work with Our Hearts

Francisca Gomes Vieira
CEO, Natural Cotton Color, Brazil
<https://naturalcottoncolor.com.br/>



Francisca Vieira, Natural Cotton Color's CEO, is known for the farming expansion of Algodão Colorido da Paraíba (Paraíba's Colored Cotton) through sustainable fashion, showing innovative collections and fashion at national and international trade shows. The brand is part of Arranjo Produtivo Local - APL (Local Productive Arrangement), by Algodão Colorido da Paraíba (Paraíba State colored cotton industry).

Describe your professional journey and the challenges with it.

My professional journey started right after graduating with a Masters degree in Production Engineering and setting up my company. Five years later, I decided to work with sustainability through social work. I noticed that the social work approach does not work when the field does not offer fair purchasing practices when there's no fair price in cotton sales. So I went to work with the men in the field, still through social work. I try to forget the challenges I have to face for being a woman. The way I was raised, it made no difference if you were a man or a woman, as far as rights were concerned. My father never made that distinction. He always treated us the same, as far as values and abilities. I learned to assert myself and I work in a 90% male-dominated environment, but I earned their respect through my abilities and knowledge, showing them that I am as capable and competent as my male colleagues.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments

I was able to create a sustainable fashion and textile company using organic cotton, which became a benchmark in Brazil. Also, the international recognition by the World Trade Organization when, in 2019, we were invited by the governments of Canada and France to participate in the WTO 2030 Trade Forum in Geneva as part of 'Trade and Climate Change' with a focus on sustainability.

Have you had any role models, and how did they inspire you?

I am inspired by people who dedicate their lives to improving the reality of a community. Social work around the world inspires me, including the impact in Brazil, such as the work of Irmã Dulce. Mother Theresa's selfless dedication to the poor and great service inspires me.

What is the role of women in fashion industry?

Regarding the fashion industry in general, I do not know the answer. But I can tell you that the sustainable fashion industry is in the hands of women. It is easier for women to work with sustainability because we work with our hearts. First, it has to go through the heart, something that usually does not happen with men.

Does the fashion industry have a gender equality issue?

In the whole world, industry is in the hands of men. That includes fashion. Women consume fashion but men control fashion around the world. Even with many female names in fashion — such as Rei Kawakubo, who is a great woman and has created a great brand — men continue to dominate.

As a female designer, have you confronted gender bias?

I have never faced gender-related issues because I believe that we make people — whether men or women — connect with the clothes we make. For us it makes no difference as to whether our customers are men or women! What matters is how much they like what we make. If we make a blazer, it does not matter if it is going to be worn by a man or a woman. I worry about designs and not about gender.

How do you deal with the gender imbalance?

Well, that is my work. To show that women can do everything men do. As I said before, I work with about 90% men and I have earned their respect. The moment I internalise that I am not inferior to any man, they know that for ME there is no gender inequality.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in the fashion industry?

The first thing women have to do is to prepare themselves and develop their abilities. If you have abilities and capabilities, you will be more able and capable than most men. It is important to know how to assert yourself as a woman and as a human being. That's very difficult nowadays but we must have our heads up and forget we are women and could be subjected to discrimination. We are human beings with the required capabilities. And

the industry will respect you for what you are and what you can do irrespective of whether you are a man or woman.

How can we promote equality in the fashion industry?

First and foremost, women must assert themselves as capable professionals. By encouraging women to hold their heads up, to get the training and to understand that gender is only one detail, much of the inequality can be mitigated.

What kind of policies should the Government implement to make a perceptible change?

Foster public policies such as facilitating credit for women. For example, introduce insurance that is cheaper for women because they have no assets and banks demand assets. It becomes impossible for women without any assets to obtain banking credit.

What is the one thing that you would like to see to remedy gender inequality in your sector?

I would like to see companies place women all along the production chain, from creation, design, weaving, in all sectors of the business. Women are more humane and sustainable fashion needs more humane individuals. Women can best have this role of humanising companies.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Globally, Women's Roles and Expertise in Agriculture Are Inadequately Recognised

Hayley Morgan

Gender Focal Point, Better Cotton Initiative, Bristol, England

www.bettercotton.org



Dedication to a more sustainable and equitable future underpins my career, which has spanned corporate social responsibility strategy development and reporting, a sustainable restaurant standard and now a global movement to transform the cotton sector at the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI). BCI is a standard system and a membership organization. It's a privilege to be BCI's Gender Focal Point, leading our gender strategy, growing new partnerships, and advocating for a more equitable and inclusive cotton industry. Originally from California, I pursued my degree in International Relations and Modern History in Scotland and Hong Kong and am now based in Bristol, England.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges that you faced as a woman.

I've had a bit of a roundabout professional journey but have always been driven by the same interests: to learn more about the world and to find purpose. While studying at university I was torn between my academic studies and a strong interest in culinary arts, which I pursued as a prep cook in five restaurants ranging from Michelin-starred fine dining to an Iranian café. Restaurant kitchens are famously intense, hierarchical — and at worst, exploitative and sexist. It was there that I learned how to stick up for myself and others and many of the skills that I use today as a sustainability professional I gained as a cook. I was lucky to find sustainability very early in my career, as it combined so many of my interests. I'm amazed by how much the industry has grown.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment you're proud of.

I'm proud to have worked collaboratively to develop BCI's first gender strategy, which outlines our commitment to supporting a more equitable cotton future. Gender equality is embedded into our mission and I'm excited for us to share more about our 2030 aspirations over the coming months.

What inspires you?

I was fortunate to be raised by family and friends who demonstrated that success does not have to come at the price of integrity.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers?

Don't be shy to invite people for coffee and ask them directly for help and advice. If someone inspires you, get to know them better!

How do you see the role of women in agriculture?

Farmers are at the heart of what we do at BCI and shedding light on the enormous contribution women farmers make to our industry drives me every day. Globally, women's roles and expertise in agriculture are inadequately recognised. In small-holder contexts, women conduct the majority of the physical labour to prepare land, sow seeds and harvest the fibre, all while juggling other responsibilities at home. This story — juggling home and work responsibilities — is not unfamiliar to most women.

Have you encountered gender bias and how did you handle it?

I experienced bias most significantly in the early phases of my career, when I noticed I was often handed feminised tasks such as event planning and passed over for opportunities I was more interested in — and very capable of doing! I had to be very intentional as I looked for new opportunities, aware that I didn't want to be pigeon-holed again. I don't believe that anyone should be given a certain role or task because of their gender identity; this can negatively affect all genders. Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectional feminism opened my eyes to the fact that while I have experienced gender bias personally, due to the many privileges I experience because of my other identities – such as being white, and university educated – my experience of gender bias is very different from others. To be the change in the sector, I need to advocate especially for those who experience varying, intersecting forms of discrimination.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

I'm fortunate to work in a collaborative and consultative team and organisation.

How have you personally contributed to setting the gender imbalance right?

Yes, by developing a publicly available strategy that invites collaboration with others in our sector, and by participating in the 'ICA Women in Cotton Working Group'.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women in cotton?

Listening to and learning more from women from all over the world about their ideas, challenges and experiences is enriching. Better understanding the unique needs of all gender identities, particularly trans and non-binary people, and how we can work together to create a more gender-equal world for everyone.

Five tips for building up and supporting women at your workplace

This is a big question! I could go in many directions but I'll focus on the following:

1. Ensure equal pay for equal work
2. Representation matters, particularly in decision-making and at leadership levels
3. Remember that women are not a homogenous group
4. Create safe spaces where women can be heard
5. Make tangible, public commitments to positive change

How did COVID-19 affect women and what can be done to effectively mitigate the impacts of the pandemic?

Another big question! Covid-19 negatively impacted gender equality in many ways. Specifically for women it has created additional risk for domestic violence, along with unsustainable expectations around childcare and work. Employers can play a critical role in offering support to women during this challenging time.

How do you see the future of women in a changing world?

So much of this depends on our collective ability to combat climate change. Women are already disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change and the outlook is bleak unless something changes.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of working women?

The UK has many policies to advance gender equality and women's rights, but it can go much further to support trans men and women and non-binary individuals, and to improve maternity and paternity and childcare provisions.

What more can Governments do?

- Improved statutory paternity cover benefits men and women.
- What is the one thing that you would like to see as an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?
- Equal pay!

How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers?

Invest more to train and engage people, to build a common language and commitment to gender equality. These commitments need to be shared by men and women, from CEOs to interns.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

Conduct a gender pay gap assessment, conduct a staff survey, talk to experts, embed gender and diversity training into staff inductions and review your HR policies.



Performance at Work Is What Makes You Strong

Karina Edith Mendoza Garza

Loans and Acquisitions, DESPEPITADORA LA SAUTEÑA SPR DE RL, Mexico

www.lasautena.mx



Karina Edith Mendoza Garza was born in Reynosa Tamaulipas. She grew up with her parents, who worked in agriculture. Karina completed a Bachelors degree in education in 2007 and was a teacher for 11 years. She started her career in the Company Despepitadora La Sauteña in 2018. Karina works in the purchase and financing area and does administrative tasks. She learnt a lot about cotton cultivation, its growth, ginning, classification and marketing processes. She is very proud to be part of a great team dedicated to this crop.

What do you do in a ginning plant?

When I first joined the company, my first tasks were the purchase order processes and to start the procedures of para financial loans in which we were able to offer \$10,000 to partners in the first year. Later I developed administrative skills to take charge of bank income and expenses, file management and necessary procedures for the company. I look after the sale of agricultural inputs and monitoring loan disbursements and repayments. In the ginning production process, I am in charge of payments and billing.

Is your work physically demanding? How do you manage your work, both at home and in the ginning plant?

My work requires not only a fixed schedule but also attention during the day. I am a mother and a professional. I manage my time and dedicate quality time to both responsibilities. I organise myself at home with my household chores and take care of my children.

Do you have enough facilities in the workplace?

We have some amenities according to our needs, within the offices such as a work area, bathrooms, patio, kitchen utensils for our food, etc.

Are the working hours too long compared to the payment received? Do you have any idea if you get lower pay than a male co-worker for the same job done?

The work schedule is from 8:00 to 17:00 hrs. I have always believed that the performance of work is what gives you professional strength. I never consider comparing salaries with my colleagues because we all have different roles. I have fair leaders who recognise one's work irrespective of the gender.

Do you think having a woman as your boss would make things different at work for you?

No. It doesn't matter really whether your boss is a man or woman. Your performance and ability as a boss don't depend on whether you are a man or a woman as long as you are aware of your responsibilities and the well-being of your workers.

What would you like to reform in the ginning industry to benefit working women?

I think women can contribute a lot in the ginning process. It is important to identify areas that are suitable for women in the ginning industry. During the time I have been in this area, the process hired no woman thus far.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

I always thought of being a professional; my dreams were to have an excellent job so that my parents and family would lack nothing.

Do you have a role model?

Elizabeth Gilbert inspires me. Her origin, where she was born, her humble lifestyle and her writings inspire me. She lacked

basic resources, and her only access was books. She had many trades until she became a famous and recognised writer. I like her because she talks a lot about the balance of life.

How has covid-19 affected your work and the workplace?

The pandemic has not affected me.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Always Add Value to Others and Don't Be Afraid to Fail

Kim Kitchings

Senior Vice President, Consumer Marketing, Cotton Incorporated, NC, USA.
<https://cottontoday.cottoninc.com/>; <https://www.cottoninc.com/>



Kim Kitchings is the Senior Vice President of Consumer Marketing at Cotton Incorporated. Kim leads corporate communications, advertising, corporate strategy, global market insights and brand partnerships. In this role, Kim's primary goals are to motivate consumers and the trade to buy items made of cotton and to affirm cotton as the fibre of choice for sustainable and eco-friendly products. Kim received a Bachelor of Arts in Business from North Carolina State University and Masters in Business Administration from Meredith College. She is a frequent presenter at industry conferences on innovation, consumer insights and marketing metrics. Her passion beyond advocating on behalf of the cotton industry is spending time with her husband and three children and canvassing the retail market for cotton items — a professional bonus.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges with it.

I began my career at Cotton Incorporated in 1995, while in graduate school, and served as a data analyst. From the beginning I was vocal, voiced opinions, offered new ideas (not always good ones) and looked for opportunities to use the market information in new and insightful ways. I was fortunate to have mentors that took the time and had the patience to educate me in the cotton business, take a chance on new — and often unproven — ideas. As my career progressed, I searched for ways to add value across the company and to the industry. I was very fortunate, in that my gender was not an obstacle in the field I represented. I was and still am cautious in international travel and respectful of other countries' laws.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment.

The use of economic information at Cotton Incorporated has always been a priority and when I joined the company in 1995 access and use to extensive consumer research was just beginning. Cotton Incorporated now conducts market research in 12 countries on a range of topics from sustainability, activewear, media use to cotton preferences. The information is shared through engaging publications, webinars, podcasts and in-person presentations (when allowed). Last year, more than 20,000 supply chain decision-makers received consumer market information that impacts the use of cotton. This number does not include the media articles and advertising that

utilise the information to showcase cotton's benefits. This is an achievement by many different stakeholders, past and present, at Cotton Incorporated and adds value and justification for continued cotton use by global brands and retailers.

Have you had any role models, and how did they inspire you?

Early in my career, I would observe different presentation techniques, how individuals managed their teams and approaches to dealing with divisive topics. The most inspiring are leaders that are passionate about their work, charismatic, willing to listen, care about employees and are honest even in difficult situations. These leaders earned respect by hard work and knowledge. I attempted to adopt the character traits I most admired about each individual as I have progressed through my career. I am also a sports fan and believe that coaches are instrumental in inspiring their players. Being in the cotton industry, most of my role models have been men. I am very grateful to those individuals and I firmly believe a common purpose and passion for cotton united us.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in your sector?

Two pieces of advice: Always add value to others and don't be afraid to fail.

What role do women in general play in the Consumer Marketing Industry?

Overall, women play a significant role in the consumer marketing industry. In cotton, there are more women in leadership positions than ever before and I believe this will continue to grow. Additionally, outreach and recruitment needs to continue for STEM disciplines as careers in these fields have not been intrinsically attractive to females.

Have you confronted gender bias?

I have been very fortunate in my career, that gender bias has not been a limiting factor. My expectation is that if you add value to others, improve programs you are working on and have an intelligent point of view, gender is a non-issue. While I am aware that many different types of bias exist, I refuse to let any of those hinder the good efforts by me or my team.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, I have a voice at Cotton Incorporated and due to professional and long-term relationships with other colleagues we collaborate to find the best means to reach our mission of improving the demand for and profitability of cotton. This doesn't mean we agree on all aspects but we can come to a compromise that is best for cotton. A team cannot function if all members play the same position or have the same type of knowledge. It takes the experience and expertise from each

part of our company to ensure we are successful and to solve the complex issues the cotton industry faces.

Five tips for building up and supporting employed women

1. Ensure that women feel empowered to voice their opinions
2. Establish a culture of learning from failures and moving on
3. Confidence is key
4. Reach out and share experiences
5. Provide opportunities to learn but ultimately initiative comes from the individual

How did Covid-19 affect women employees and what can be done to effectively mitigate the impacts?

For families with children at home and unable to go to school or day-care, it has been the most challenging. Mentally, emotionally, and physically it was and still is difficult. The pandemic has caused individuals to reconsider what is important in their work and personal lives and has also shown there are different ways (remote, virtually, et) of working and being successful at your job. Finding a way to meet the demands of the job and helping employees with work/life balance is essential.

What does the future for women in cotton look like?

I believe there are opportunities for those that are interested in cotton; it takes courage to enter career fields that have not been held by people that look, talk or have the cultural background you do. Take the leap!

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women employees?

The USDA, which oversees 22 research and promotion programs for the commodities industry including cotton, has encouraged and recruited women to take on leadership positions, serve on advisory committees and get connected through a mentoring network for cotton. To learn more about these specific opportunities, please click the link below:

<https://www.usda.gov/our-agency/initiatives/women-agriculture>

How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers in the cotton industry?

We can showcase experts in the cotton industry at key universities and colleges to show the breadth of professional careers that are needed in the cotton industry, all the way from agriculture, product development, sustainability, sourcing, marketing and consumer specialists to ensure that cotton remains the fibre of choice for global consumers. We need to let prospective students know we do everything from 'dirt to shirt' and there are numerous opportunities.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Agriculture is Primarily a Male Dominated Industry

La Rhea Pepper

CEO, Textile Exchange. USA
<http://TextileExchange.org>



La Rhea Pepper is the co-founder and CEO of Textile Exchange, an organisation that inspires and builds a community to accelerate transformational and positive change within the apparel and textile industry. An authentic educator at heart, La Rhea combines her heritage of organic farming, formal teacher education, and passion for people and planet to challenge leaders across the globe to re-imagine 'business as usual'.

La Rhea has served as an influential advisor and board member for multiple industry organisations through her dedication to making a positive difference in the world.

Tell us your story

I am a fifth-generation cotton farmer and, in addition to Textile Exchange, co-founded two successful organic cotton businesses. Growing up in cotton farming taught me a way of living that is in harmony with the land and honours life: life in the soil for the farm, for the family, for the community and ultimately the world. My family legacy, and my grandparents in particular, have been my mentors. I am fortunate to have had past generations leave a strong legacy for me to follow and I am driven to carry that legacy forward to leave this world a better place for my grandchildren and their grandchildren.

Though my husband and I had an organic cotton farm, producing organic cotton was not enough for us. It became clear that there was a need to educate business leaders about why prioritising responsibly grown materials in their supply chain was important. Sharing my family's legacy beyond our farm was necessary to produce long-term, meaningful and positive change. This is where being a woman has led to many opportunities. As a woman organic cotton farmer, I was in a unique position to be authentic, to lead by example and to be inclusive. This led to building a community and creating connections that have opened the door to tackling big issues. The challenges I have faced have been more related to business models and a lack of understanding on priorities for preferred and responsible systems.

I am very proud that Textile Exchange is now celebrating 20 years of building connected communities and taken action to create adoptable and more sustainable solutions through responsible, preferred and organic fibres. With a foundation of being an open and inclusive ecosystem, we have grown from a small team of dedicated pioneers to close to 90 people, 80% of whom happen to be women.

My advice for anyone building a career in this sector is to make sure you have a strong foundation in knowledge, be willing to continually learn and be open to new ideas. I credit my success to being present and accessible to the community.

How do you contribute as a woman to the cotton sector?

The reality is that agriculture is primarily a male-dominated industry. For women, there are challenges with — in some instances the physical labour — and with access to resources. In my experience, identity-preserved growing systems — such as organic cotton and other more sustainable agriculture — encourage the contributions of women with training and resource options to support their engagement and involvement.

As the co-founder and CEO of Textile Exchange, I am proud to be leading a community that is influencing opportunities for women and other marginalised groups. These opportunities

include training, education, empowerment and market-driven solutions that protect investments and have fair financial returns.

What kind of a change is needed?

Real change requires every human, including young women, to have access to basic education. Governments and local communities should be ensuring this inalienable right. Beyond that, resources, banking and finance should be accessible in rural communities, and women given equal access to these resources.

Throughout the supply chain, there are many opportunities for women. Investment to ensure women have access to training and education are key for them to take advantage of these opportunities.

International organisations can help by creating a freely accessible resource directory for each country that creates awareness and includes opportunities. Additionally, they can help by actively participating to create funds that ensure training, education and resources are accessible.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Do Not Be Afraid, Open More Doors, Speak for Those Who Cannot and Grow Together with Them

María Fernanda Burneo Sevilla

Founder, Kikuyo Ecuador
www.kikuyoecuador.com



María Fernanda Burneo Sevilla is a multimedia graphic designer with a minor in photography, a Masters in Communication and a specialisation in strategic business communication. She has more than 10 years of experience in advertising, branding and environmental strategic communications working for organizations such as the Charles Darwin Scientific Foundation, Pachamama Foundation, Amazon Frontlines, Goldman Environmental Prize, CEDENMA and WWF. Maria is a proud mother of two strong girls and since 2019, she has dedicated her time on creating and launching her company Kikuyo: Alternativas Sostenibles (@Kikuyoec) focused on designing, manufacturing and marketing sustainable home and daily life alternatives to plastic and disposables, while also working as an independent consultant on strategic environmental communication.

Describe your professional journey, the challenges you faced as a woman and how you resolved them?

I am a happy Ecuadorian mother of two powerful girls. I have been passionate about nature since my childhood. I studied Graphic Design and specialised in Strategic Communication, which I have managed to tie in with my passion for environmental issues. Along this path, I have also connected my creative side as a designer with my company Kikuyo Ecuador. As a result, I have the opportunity to design and manufacture home products that replace plastic and disposables. However, I firmly believe that first, we have to change what we want by taking action. One of the biggest challenges I have faced as a woman has been the social inability to understand that motherhood is not disabling but can fit together in your professional life and even boost it. Mainly the way to solve it has been not falling into the system of disabling myself for being a mother, but looking for my path and alternatives, and showing myself that I can do everything without lowering my performance. But it is a long way.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment

I feel that through my company Kikuyo, I have managed to tie in all my beliefs not only professionally but also personally. I think businesses created by women have that factor, the balance factor, a principle that must apply today to everything on the planet.

Do you have any role models who inspire you?

I think it may sound cliché, but my best examples have been my parents. They have been an example of life, of perseverance, but also evolution. They have been part of significant changes in the world and their wisdom has taught them to handle those changes with calm and empathy. Also, they were the ones who inspired me to love and respect nature!

What is the role of women in the fashion industry?

Women are 'a fundamental pillar' in the fashion sector, be it clothing or home, as is the case with Kikuyo. The entire team is 80% women in finance, administrative and manufacturing roles for my products. Each plays a vital part in bringing their impressive capabilities into the organisation, details and creative capacity.

Does the fashion industry have a gender-equality issue?

I definitively think so. It was believed for a long time that those who manufacture products in the production chain are 'less important'. It means deplorable working conditions, low wages without security that become equal to those in slavery. Women have held the vast majority of these positions. However, that vision is outdated, inhuman and absurd; it is also very far from

reality. Manufacturing is the mainstay of the whole process and conditions must change, but that only happens if those who run companies do things the right way. It also occurs in agricultural production, especially in cotton farms that require female labour, who due to their special abilities treat raw materials carefully. Again, their working conditions are deplorable and inhumane in many parts of the world and we must demand a change.

Do you think, as a female designer, you have been confronted by gender bias, and what did you do to address it??

I think that, in general, there is a difference in treatment when you talk to a woman in the business and production sector. Generally, as a designer and entrepreneur, I have received comments that trivialise what I do, as if it were a hobby and not a company. That kind of attitude has helped me know who to negotiate with or not because it tells me a lot about the type of persons and business. On some occasions, I had made it clear to persons when their behaviour was incorrect. However, I never stay silent; that has never been an option.

What else do you wish to do to improve the contribution of women?

I believe we have the potential to build communities that, in the long run, can help develop a new system for the planet and our societies and be able further to strengthen family farming associations and women's small businesses to work synergies among all.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in the fashion industry?

Do not be afraid, because we need you to open more doors, speak for those who cannot and grow together.

How do you promote equality in the fashion industry?

We are generating equitable conditions according to the needs of women, eradicating systematic violence and promoting safe spaces for all. We are also working with companies, factories and suppliers that share the same values regarding women's rights and personnel in both manufacturing and raw materials.

What kind of policies should the government enact to support working women?

We are eradicating systematic violence but as long as the state still practices violence against women, no law can help.

What do you suggest should change to remedy gender inequality?

Better working conditions in the manufacturing sector and for women in agriculture with suitable conditions for their work, health and children.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Facilitate Women's Access to Positions of Responsibility

Dr Ouattara Gniré Mariam

Director of Production at the Cotton and Cashew Council, Ivory Coast.



Dr OUATTARA Gniré Mariam is the Director of Production at the Cotton and Cashew Council in Ivory Coast. Her professional career began with rural activities with groups of women in rural areas during her studies. After obtaining Doctorate, she successively held the positions of National Coordinator of the African Cashew Initiative Project (ICA), Technical Director and Production Director at the Cotton and Cashew Council.

Describe your professional journey and challenges that you may have encountered

I have held various senior positions in the cotton and cashew sectors. I worked with women groups in rural areas. The main challenge I have encountered is that of improving the productivity (quantity and quality) of cotton and cashew nuts in my country. The strategy adopted to face this challenge is teamwork, good coordination of my team and empowerment of team members.

What are your accomplishments?

My satisfaction, as well as that of all players in the cotton sector in Côte d'Ivoire, is that the cotton production in our country has reached a record level in recent seasons. National seed cotton production increased from 310,177 tonnes in the 2015-16 season to 559,483 tonnes in 2020-21.

Do you have a role model who inspires you?

The role model who inspires me is that of a courageous, determined and committed woman who, through her efforts, promotes sustainable development in her environment, in her community.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

When I was a student, I always dreamed of playing an important role in the development process of my country.

As a woman how do you contribute to development?

To contribute to the development of the cotton sector, I intend to mobilise all the material and human resources available to me to make them available for development.

Did you encounter gender bias at work?

I have not been in such a situation. The collaboration was good with my hierarchy as well as my colleagues and collaborators.

Are you part of major decision making in your organization?

I answer in the affirmative. Indeed, as Director of Cotton and Cashew Production, I am part of the current management team of the Cotton and Cashew Council in Ivory Coast. As Director, I am also a member of the Board of Directors of this institution. I do influence decision making.

What do you think can be done to improve the contribution of women?

Women can play a major role in development. It is necessary to strengthen the capacities of women, allow greater involvement of women at all levels of the sector and appoint more women to positions of responsibility.

Has the Government enacted any special policies to support women employees?

Taking gender into account requires political will. Indeed, gender is taken into account in the supreme law of the land. With regard to the cotton sector, the emphasis is in particular on the following policies:

- The application of the regulatory system in force, in favour of gender in the country
- Awareness-raising actions to take gender into account in the activities of the various links in the value chain
- Encouraging women and young people to apply for all vacancies — especially positions of responsibility
- Promotion of women to positions of responsibility
- Reducing the arduousness of the work by providing women with adequate means of production

What else can be done to bridge the gender gap?

A few policy measures can help to reduce the gender gap:

- Intensify the application of the regulatory system in favour of gender in the country
- Implement capacity-building programs for women
- Allow greater involvement of women at all levels of the sector
- Appoint more women to positions of responsibility
- What is the one thing that you think can make a big difference?
- Facilitate the access of women to positions of responsibility.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

There are two things that international organisations can do. Sensitisation of stakeholders and implementation of capacity-building programs for women in training, skill development, equipment handling and financing.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Women Are Capable of Changing the World

Maysa Motta Gadelha

Director President, CoopNatural, Brazil
www.naturalfashion.com.br



Maysa Motta Gadelha is from Minas Gerais. She lived in Paraíba for 43 years. Maysa is a training designer and social entrepreneur since 1985. She started working with organic cotton in Paraíba in 2000, initially as an agroecological initiative and later certified as organic. Building the production chain and raising awareness among farmers was the biggest challenge. Her organisation has the motto of 'Respect for people and the environment'. With important partnerships with serious institutions, the organisation continues to grow and encourage the increase of areas in the Brazilian semiarid region.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges.

Someone told me once that I'm a woman who talks to men on an equal footing. I was never discriminated for that, but respected, and with a lot of credibility. My challenges were at home, with husband and children. I was a very young mother. However, at the age of going out to work, my children were already old enough and did not need basic care. In fact, the biggest personal challenges were at home. My husband didn't prevent me from doing anything but at the beginning he made it clear what hindered him in his work as a doctor. Over the years, I started traveling alone to fairs and worked with farmers and the production chain without taking him out of his work. I decided, without forcing myself, doing what I needed to do, and things started to happen.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments

Paraíba today has an identity in national and international handicrafts, which is coloured cotton. Embrapa, which researched this technology, made it available to us in 2000 and since then we have built the production chain and the desire to have the product on the market. It worked and I am very proud of having been this person who today provides income opportunities for hundreds of artisans and farmers.

Have you had any role models, and how did they inspire you?

I confess that all my life I have been inspired by calm and persistent people. My husband is this calm person. I have the persistence as well as the power to listen and understand people and always seek peaceful solutions. Partners are fundamental to a good life and must always be treated well. Empathy is good for me and I believe for our products too.

How can you contribute as a woman to the sector?

I feel that people respect and listen to me, so my responsibility is even bigger. When people are inspired by you, it is very dangerous to have a bad attitude and my responsibility is to always position myself peacefully while focusing on the real goals.

What is the role of women in fashion industry?

In my opinion, women are the ones who manage fashion in the world. Not only through creations but in manufacturing, sewing, accessories, applications and crafts, but also as main fashion consumers

Does the fashion industry have a gender equality issue?

I don't think so, because most of the fashion industry is managed by women. I always seek to benefit the women who work with me throughout the chain. We know that there is no equality but we try to apply sorority, benefitting women in what depends on us.

As a female designer, what is your special contribution to the industry?

As a designer, I've been working on concept in fashion since 2000. Trying to value the product's history, reduce consumption and minimise waste, value women's handwork, value care for the environment and people, value knowledge from where the product comes from and where the money goes. Today these concepts are very widespread but weren't quite there 21 years ago.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women to this sector?

My greatest desire today and what I seek daily is to open up the market for solidary. Small farmers and artisans need to have a voice and to be seen to sell products so my job has been to look for new ways to bring income to women and farmers without market access and with products available.

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in the fashion industry?

My advice to young women is that they think about each other, that they have patience and persistence, that they learn to listen and see the reason for things. Put yourself in the place of others and don't find yourself victims of prejudice — fight for your space as a woman of courage.

What does the future for women in the fashion industry look like?

Women need justice and equality as well as sorority and patience.

Is help needed?

Yes, we always need help, in the dissemination, in the vision of each reality.

How can we promote equality in the fashion industry?

Publicising the work of women, young designers and entrepreneurs will empower women more.

What kind of policies should the Government implement against gender prejudices?

In recent times in Brazil, we have been experiencing an increase

of prejudice. Many policies are against reason. We need to propose an agenda of public policies of equality, to fight prejudices not only against women but against all minorities.

What is the one thing that you would like to see an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?

The government must change. We need training and education. Women are more focussed and responsible than men. They are the ones who take care of the children and provide them with love and care. Women are capable of changing the world.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Empower Women in Making Key Decisions

Rabia Sultan

Owner, KGF Farms, Pakistan



Rabia Sultan has developed an extensive educational portfolio and career spanning 20 years. Beginning her journey in 1993, she progressed to serve as member on many committees within the public and private sector. Throughout her professional life, Rabia has gained experience in water management, cotton crop production, and cultivation of mango. Her passion for cotton led her to develop a Bt cotton variety in 2007 at her farm. In 2017, she was awarded first prize by the Government of Punjab for the highest cotton production of 2,440 kg per acre. Her experiences in the public sector led to her being nominated for the Fatima Jinnah Award in 2006. Rabia Sultan is a multifaceted personality who embodies the commitment of a lifelong learner.

Tell us about your professional journey.

My farm is located at Thatta Gurmani, District Muzaffargarh, Punjab, Pakistan. The total farm area is 400 acres of which 30 acres are under cotton cultivation. Previously cotton was sown on 150 acres. I supervise and manage the farm. I have about 50 people looking after my whole farm. Men work as permanent labour and women as seasonal labour.

What is your main role on the farm?

Being the owner of my farm, I make all the decisions. My role is management of the farm and planning all of the farming activities covering all the crop production cycles and marketing of the production.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments.

- Developing a Bt cotton variety on my farm
- Getting the highest yield per acre in the whole of the province
- Getting recognition as the best farmer is my biggest achievement
- Advocacy for cotton farmers

If the clock is rewound is there something you would do better for the sector?

- Strengthen research and extension to farmers
- Create women farmer resource centres where they can have access to new technology, ideas, training, networking and international good agricultural practices.

Do you have any role models who inspired you?

My father and grandfather who both were passionate cotton farmers. They inspired me a lot.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

As a child I always enjoyed going to the farms with my father in his Land Rover. Now, when I look back, that was the beginning of my interest in farming as I saw heaps of cotton packed in gunny bags. The fields looked like white snow — a treat to the eye. Picking cotton as a child brought joy and happiness. My passion for growing cotton began then.

What do you think are the key gender-specific obstacles in cotton farms? How can we overcome them?

The most critical gender-specific obstacles are lack of access to land; markets; inputs; financing; agricultural training and education; suitable working conditions; gender parity; equality; transport; and problems with timely availability of inputs. Having inclusive policies for women farmers, ensuring better economic opportunities and creating policies for greater economic power for women can help in reducing the gender-specific obstacles.

What is the one thing that you think can make a major change?

Agricultural training and education.

Did you face discrimination in the sector for being a woman?

I did not face any discrimination.

As a woman what extra do you have to do to ensure work-home balance?

Home is the first responsibility of a woman and she can be the best home maker. Balancing responsibilities of home and work is only possible if the family members cooperate and understand the equation. I have been lucky in this regard that my spouse completely understands my work and is very supportive of it.

What can the ICAC do to support women in the cotton industry?

Interaction between women farmers is very important and learning from each other

always adds value to the learning experience. ICAC can provide the platform and enabling environment to do so. Making women farmers more visible and rewarding them for their work and accomplishments will be very encouraging. Empower women on making key decisions regarding cotton crop management by building their capacity through training programmes.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



The Australian Cotton Industry is Leading the Way for Women Working in Agriculture

Renée Anderson

Farm owner/manager, Central Queensland, Australia
Renée Anderson is a food and fibre producer in Central QLD Australia.



Tell us about your farm.

I farm 500 hectares of mixed cropping with my family in the Central Highlands in Central Queensland, Australia, on an irrigation property.

How many men and women do you employ to work on your cotton farm?

During the most part of the year, we employ one full-time employee. He has been working for us for the last seven years. During cotton-picking season we employ up to eight extra women and men to operate the machinery.

How to you rate your skills of farming on a scale of 1-7, 1 being extraordinarily skilled to 7 with no skills?

I would rate our farming skill levels as a 5. There are always opportunities to learn new skills and adopt new changes, especially in the area of precision agriculture as technology continues to develop. I also believe we continue to learn more about soil science and the interaction of soil microbiology and plant health, especially in the face of changing environments due to climatic variability.

What is your role on the farm and how do you contribute?

I have multiple roles on the farm including assisting with the agronomy, working on the day-to-day farming activities,

irrigation and cotton picking. I also manage the bookkeeping and marketing of crops, the human resources (HR) and workers' health safety (WHS) on the farm and run the environmental stewardship program 'myBMP' on my farm.

Being the owner of a farm, does it empower you to take major decisions?

There are lots of decisions to be made on a farm. Farming is a highly complex business with external forces outside of our control that add to the risk of making those decisions, including weather and markets, pest pressures and water availability. As farm owners, we have to make all the decisions, using previous knowledge and with external expert advice and support from agronomists and accountants etc.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments on your cotton farm?

We farm a diverse range of crops including cotton, mung beans, wheat, chickpeas and popcorn. We are really proud to ensure we are certified under the national myBMP program and international certification as BCI growers.

The future longevity of the farm and the surrounding environment are really important to us as we manage the land within a reef catchment. The management practices we use are based on research-driven decisions to optimise sustainability and efficiency that enables the farm business to be profitable within challenging climatic conditions.

If the clock is rewound is there something you would do better for the sector?

I would love to see water not only used for productive cropping but used in natural resource management for establishing environmental shelter belts between large paddocks with a focus on soil cover to minimise wind and rain erosion and as a proactive biosecurity measure.

As our Australian summers get hotter and drier with more volatile storms, protecting our topsoil is vitally important. When my farm was initially developed by the government for the irrigation scheme, it was set up on natural grasslands in small blocks that didn't allow for areas outside of productive cropping land to be utilised as remnant vegetation. There is tremendous value in these areas as habitat for beneficial insects, birds and bats for enabling integrated pest management on the farm.

Did you have a role model who inspired you?

My grandfather was a wonderful role model for me. He was extremely hard-working, firm but fair and a delightful character with a thirst for knowledge and sharing it with others. I often worked alongside him on the farm during holidays. He had a lot of respect and kindness for others and was an endearing larrikin (troublemaker), who loved to share stories.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

I always knew I was going to work in the field of agriculture or meteorology. I still find the weather fascinating, albeit frustrating at times as it can impact our day-to-day farming activities so quickly.

How can you contribute as a woman to agriculture?

I can continue to share my passion and knowledge and farming journey with children and with people who are within agriculture and outside of it. Those people, while not connected directly to agriculture, are interlinked by their daily use of food and fibre.

I find agriculture to be an exciting field of employment as the diversity of roles is never-ending regardless of someone's skill level. There's certainly something here for everyone.

What according to you are the key gender-specific obstacles in farming?

The key gender-specific obstacles for progress in farming are equality, suitable working conditions, timely availability of labour, agricultural training and access to land.

What is the one thing that you would do to overcome the major obstacles?

Feeling safe in your role is something agriculture needs to continue to strive for. Everyone should feel safe at work and have the

capacity to work toward their goals without barriers. Although it's not something I experience daily, I have previously and it is something many other women continue to face, both in Australia and in other countries — and it comes back to the basics of equality, access to education and training, sexism, misogyny.

Did you face discrimination for being a woman farmer?

Unfortunately, there have been many times in discussions where I have had my knowledge dismissed because I challenged someone's understanding of a topic, when others have put forward the same information on my behalf it has been taken on board and accepted.

The Australian cotton industry is leading the way for women working in agriculture, so I have been fortunate enough to have leading mentors and role models in the workplace and in industry to reach out to.

What do you have to do, as a woman, to ensure work-home balance?

Work-home balance can be a challenge when you live where you work and there are always many tasks to be done on a farm. However, it has always been an important priority in ensuring flexibility in work hours and when possible taking weekends off, except during the busiest of periods like planting and harvest.

By working effectively, with a lot of careful planning and good management we can ensure that the farm runs smoothly and effectively and all activities are done in a timely manner. Preparation is key!

We have a large focus on health and wellbeing and being part of a community where attending sporting, community, school and social events is the very fabric of our lives outside of farming.

What can the ICAC do to support women in the cotton industry?

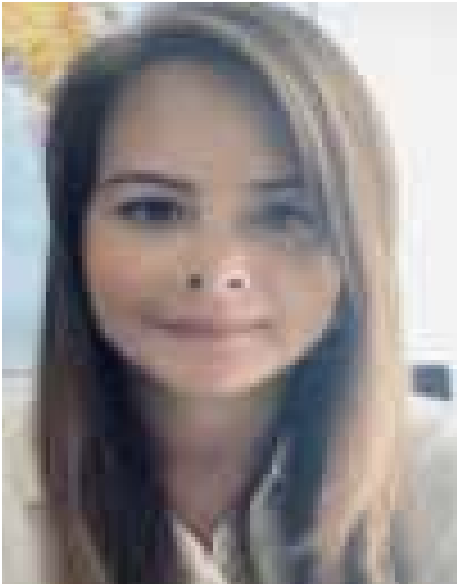
Education and training empower women and give them a voice. The ICAC can facilitate education and training to increase women's capabilities and confidence to ensure that they have access to a diverse range of employment opportunities and lending facilities. Women often take on many unpaid roles within families and communities to ensure they thrive. In many instances, it leaves women vulnerable to poverty or homelessness in situations of family breakdowns as they have no significant financial backing. Policies on superannuation are necessary for women to fall back on to support themselves or their families.



My Mother Inspires Me to Always Stand My Ground and Not Be a Pushover

Rhea Wakefield

Compliance and Sustainability Manager, Wakefield Inspection Services Limited
www.wiscontrol.com



Rhea Wakefield has been working in the cotton industry for five years, within her family company – Wakefield Inspection Services Limited (WIS), which was established in 1993 as a private entity by her grandfather and father. Ms Wakefield says, ‘Even though five years feels like only a short time to learn the ins-and-outs of the industry, cotton has been in my blood since I was five years old.’ Her role within WIS is as Compliance and Sustainability Manager, due to her nine years previous experience in quality assurance and working as part of an environmental team. She works alongside their operations department and enjoys the travelling opportunities that her role and industry brings.

Describe your professional journey and the challenges that you faced as a woman.

During my entire career, I have always worked in male-dominated industries. My first ‘serious’ job straight out of university was working within a construction company and my second was working within the ship management industry. I definitely faced some challenges within both industries which has probably led me to be who I am today. Working within the quality department, a large part of my role was attending construction sites such as gas pipelines and electricity sites and conducting audits. It was similar in my ship-management position, I walked along huge cargo vessels observing the way the ships were run and checking the paperwork that was legally required.

Now I am sure you can imagine that being a short 23-year-old woman in a hard-hat, steel-toe boots, high-visibility jackets — with a notebook and checklist, walking around construction sites and huge container vessels asking questions, making suggestions for improvement and having to not take no for an answer — was not an easy job. Many would simply stare, wondering what on earth I was doing there and whether I had taken a wrong turn in my car. Some would evade my questions and try to deceive me with answers or inform me that my knowledge was incorrect, even when I knew it wasn’t. However, being a lot younger than most and the only female on site it was hard to assert my position.

Over time I built relationships with all the workers on board and on-site I was able to successfully complete my tasks. It was definitely easier to get conversations going and actions completed once they understood that I was here to stay and that really, I was a regular person — just a female not a male. In the end, I really enjoyed working with everyone I came across in all male-dominated industries. Once I knew how to gain respect and open communication, I certainly never took no for an answer. I am not afraid to speak up if I am correct, but I am also not afraid to ask for help when it is needed.

Luckily, I believe that after spending so much time in male dominated industries, I have not found as many challenges when I moved into the cotton sector. I do believe that I am lucky to have had the experiences I have had to learn how to deal with tricky situations, however I also put that down to the wonderful relationships that WIS has within the industry. We have many friends amongst the industry who are always helpful and kind, leading me to find fewer challenges as a woman in cotton.

Tell us about a professional accomplishment you’re proud of that you have achieved in your job?

I am proud of implementing quality management systems within our company and being able to help many different managers around the world to improve the way in which we work.

Who are your role models, and how did they inspire you?

My parents are my role models. My father — as he learnt from his father, Frank Wakefield — to always listen to others and to be good, honest and true. My father is constantly busy and very motivated to complete all tasks; he is very determined and rarely stops for a break. This inspires me to keep pushing myself. My mother inspires me to always stand my ground and not to be a pushover — important advice when working with strong willed men.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

When I was younger, I thought I would be a teacher. However, as I grew up, I knew the family business was where I belonged. I had glimpsed the industry during International Cotton Association (ICA) events, attending dinners and parties when my father was President of the ICA, and I loved meeting new people and hearing many hilarious stories being shared!

What's the one piece of advice you'd give to other women just starting their careers in the cotton industry?

There are no silly questions. Ask as many questions as you need! Cotton is a complex industry, and I find that everyone is very helpful no matter where I turn. I would also recommend learning about other cultures and countries as the industry is so diverse.

Do you think as a female trader, have you confronted gender bias?

I do not think I have confronted gender bias in the sector. I think this is a result of being a family member from a long-standing company within the sector.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, within our workplace, no matter who you are, all ideas and thoughts are considered by higher management.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve the contribution of women?

I think that younger women entering the company who will be client-facing and attending events should be provided with a mentor to help them integrate into the sector.

What does the future for women in cotton look like?

I think the future looks bright now that people are aware of the differences and benefits that a woman can bring in terms of ideas and discussions. Even completing something like this issue of the ICAC Recorder that focusses on women shows that it is at the forefront of people's minds.

What is the one thing that you would like to see an immediate change to remedy gender inequality?

Welcome more women into the sector by promoting the sector and jobs to them.

How can the cotton industry invest in building women's careers?

I think mentoring and promoting would play a big role in investing in women's careers. I also think information about where women could find difficulties would be important. Not all cultures accept women as equals and I think that women should know what to expect when dealing with those cultures.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

Having a mentor scheme, providing information about cultures and differences. Having schemes for younger/newer employees for men and women — by making contacts in the sector as soon as possible — helps as you form friendships which lead to business and information sharing so it would knock out gender bias sooner rather than later.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Access to Farmland Is a Challenge for New Farmers

Shelley Butler Barlow

Co-owner/co-manager/ Secretary, Cotton Plains Farm, Inc.
Cotton Plains Farm Facebook page



Shelley S. Butler Barlow farms with her husband Joseph Barlow, Jr., his father and their son at Cotton Plains Farm, located in Chuckatuck, Virginia. Butler Barlow graduated Western Branch High School in 1978 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture from Virginia Tech in 1982. Shelley has worked in many different segments of agriculture for nearly 40 years. In addition to her responsibilities as a Suffolk City Council member, Shelley serves as President of the Board of Directors for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and is a member of the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors. She is a 2016 fellow of Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) and represents Virginia Agriculture nationally with the Cotton Board Research and Promotion program. In the community, Butler Barlow is a member of Wesley Chapel UMC, Possum Hollow Ruritan Club, Nansemond Farm Bureau Ag Education committee, Suffolk Meals on Wheels (Board of Directors), and serves on the Suffolk FSA county committee. She is also Director of Healthy Food Initiatives for Healthy Suffolk, advising local school and community garden projects.

Tell us about your farm?

We farm about 850 acres in Suffolk City and Isle of Wight County in Virginia.

How many men and women do you employ to work on your co-own farm?

Our employees are two men and one woman.

What is your role on the farm?

I currently manage all finances and record-keeping. Ten years ago my husband and I allocated all the field work such as planting/crop management/harvesting. After hiring our son, I do less field work but still assist and play a major role during harvest season.

Being the owner of a farm does it empower you to take major decisions on it?

Yes. I am involved in all major decision making.

Tell us about your key accomplishments.

Being selected to serve on the Virginia Cotton Board and then being appointed to represent Virginia at the National level on the Cotton Board.

If the clock is rewound is there something you would do better for the sector?

I have served the industry as best I could.

Do you have a role model who inspired you?

I grew up in a family of strong women and while they were/are not involved in agriculture, they all have had successful careers and inspired me to work hard in my chosen profession.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

My plan was to become a veterinarian but after my experience in the College of Agriculture at Virginia Tech, I changed direction and have been involved in agriculture throughout my entire career.

What in your view are the main gender-specific obstacles in cotton production and what you think can be done to overcome them?

In their order of importance, the key constraints are:

- Access to land
- Timely availability of labour for farm operations,
- Financing and
- Agricultural training

Because my husband and I co-own and manage our farm, I have not had many business interactions as an independent female operator. I have had the experience of having to convince someone that I am actually a farmer or that I actually

operate machinery and do other traditional 'male' jobs around the farm. I have very often been in situations where it was assumed that my role on the farm was limited to traditional 'female' jobs. I also married into an existing family farming operation. Starting a new farming operation (for women or men) is very challenging for all of the reasons listed above.

What are the main challenges?

Access to farmland is a challenge for new farmers. Retention of farmland by existing operators also includes many challenges, from development and other commercial uses, other farmers, other family members (transitioning from one generation to the next), to the generally low margins/profitability that makes successful farming difficult.

Did you face any discrimination being a woman farmer?

Mainly doubts about my credibility and experience as a farmer.

What do you have to do, as a woman, to ensure work-home balance?

Making sure that everyone on our farm understands that all jobs can be done by everyone and that no jobs are exclusively male or female including both farm and household jobs. I also try to protect time reserved for other activities so we all have non-farm activities as well as down time to rest and relax. This is hard to achieve during planting and harvest!

What can the ICAC do to support women in the cotton industry?

It's important to know that other women are involved in the industry and to learn about their experiences. There are so few of us, it's good to know that we're not alone in the work we do as women in agriculture.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC



Recruit More Women in Managerial Positions for Gender Equality

Sujata Saxena

Acting Director, ICAR-Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technologies (ICAR-CIRCOT),
Mumbai, India



Sujata Saxena is the acting Director of the ICAR-Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technologies (ICAR-CIRCOT), Mumbai, India. Dr Saxena is Principal Scientist (Organic Chemistry) & Head I/c, Chemical & Biochemical Processing Division, ICAR- CIRCOT, Mumbai. Dr Saxena has been associated with numerous research projects. She has published many scientific papers, articles and book chapters and presented more than 20 papers at national and international conferences. She was part of the joint CICR- CIRCOT team which developed three naturally brown-coloured desi cotton germplasms registered by Plant Germplasm registration Committee of ICAR. Dr Saxena is the recipient of JRF and SRF of CSIR for Doctoral degree. She is a Member of TC 38 (Textiles) committee of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and is associated with Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) as member of TX 05 and TX 07 sub-committees on textiles. Dr Saxena is Senior member at the American Association of Textile Chemists and Colorists, USA, and was a consultant in projects funded by UNDP and ICEF on development of application techniques for natural dyes on cotton.

Describe your professional journey, the challenges that you faced as a woman and how did you resolve them?

I am Dr Sujata Saxena, MSc, PhD, Principal Scientist (organic chemistry), currently working as the Director (Acting) of the Central Institute for Research on Cotton Technology (CIRCOT), Mumbai, India. ICAR-CIRCOT is a premier institute under the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) well known in the cotton fraternity for its contributions in post-harvest processing technology of cotton. I am married to Dr Gopal Krishna, Director and Vice chancellor of the Central Institute of Fisheries Education (CIFE), Mumbai under the ICAR. I am also the proud mother of a son and a daughter both pursuing their chosen professions.

My professional journey had been good and satisfying as I got to work in various research projects pertaining to varied aspects of cotton post-harvest technology such as chemical processing and finishing of cotton and its blends; application of natural dyes to cotton; cotton value chain; application of plasma and nanotechnology to cotton utilisation of cottonseed and its by-products. Some of these were projects sponsored by international and national organizations such as UNDP, ICEF, NAIP, NFBSFARA of ICAR, TMC, DST etc. and others were funded by the institute.

I was working for my doctoral degree on a CSIR fellowship when I was selected as a scientist in ICAR and after taking an

extension of about seven months to complete the experimental studies, I joined CTRL, Mumbai (as CIRCOT was then known) toward the end of 1986. That was the beginning of my long and continuing association with cotton. Over this period, I got promoted to the positions of scientist (Senior scale), Senior Scientist and then Principal Scientist. As I rose in seniority, I also discharged the duties of Section in-charge, Head of the Division and now I am the Director (Acting) of the institute.

Being a woman, I too faced quite a few challenges in my professional journey and first of these was to stay alone in a city far away from my parents. Luckily, I was able to get accommodation in the institute's staff quarters and my colleagues and neighbours were helpful and supportive. After my marriage, my husband (also a scientist in ICAR) was posted in Mumbai but in a different institute (CIFE) because he is a veterinarian. Working in different institutes had its own advantages and challenges. One advantage was that our meetings, seminars and conferences were at different times and one of us was there with the kids. One disadvantage was that one of us had to commute a long distance; it was my husband initially when the kids were small and me later. There were issues of day care as none of our parents or close family members were staying with us so I extended my leave beyond the usual maternity leave (it was three months at that time) to about a year on both occasions and thereafter we were lucky to find families who took good care of them.

Tell us about your professional accomplishments.

As a researcher there were many occasions in which I got exciting results from the experiments and I felt proud of those. The first of these accomplishments worth mentioning was when I was able to develop a process for dyeing cotton with Lac dye, a dye thought to only work on wool and silk. What made it even more special was that the work was carried out on a first-ever consultancy project at the institute sponsored by National Handloom Development Corporation. I was later invited to present the work at the Union Ministry of Textiles, New Delhi. Another big professional achievement that I am proud of is that presently both I and my husband are heading our respective institutes as Director and that may be a first instance for our organisations.

Have you had a role model who inspired you?

My mother was a role model for me. She was a college teacher as also performed the household responsibilities very efficiently. She took great care to ensure a sound educational foundation for me and my siblings. She was always there to listen to us and was well-recognised among her students for her teaching skills and the knowledge of her subject which was mostly self-acquired.

What did you dream of becoming when you were younger?

I always wanted to work, be independent, do something good for the society and my dream was to be in a managerial position.

Do you think as a female researcher, have you confronted gender bias and what did you specifically to overcome?

I do not recall any gender bias as such until I got married and my husband too got posted at Mumbai. Professionally I was not being taken seriously and also my two long maternity leaves — especially the second one — was not taken in a positive light by my superiors. I worked hard to overcome it and when I got into senior positions, I took care that the special needs of the women researchers working under me are taken care of.

Are you part of major decision making in your workplace?

Yes, as Director, I make all decisions on the entire activities of the institute. Earlier, as Head of the Division, I was looking after the day-to-day activities of the division and was making recommendations to the Director about divisional research and purchasing activities. Earlier, when I was a senior scientist, as a member/chairperson of important committees such as the Purchasing Committee, Prioritization, Monitoring and Implementation, etc. — I contributed to the decision-making process. At the level of scientist, I was responsible for the planning and execution of my research projects.

What more do you wish to do, personally, to improve contribution of women scientists?

I would like to change the perception that women are not committed to the development of the organisation and they take undue advantage of the many facilities available to them under various measures introduced by the government to help improve participation of women in the workforce. I would expect women working in my Institute to also be responsible and committed employees while shouldering the responsibilities of the family and motherhood. I would like to provide them all possible support so that they can give their best on both fronts.

What policies has the Government adopted for the benefit of women employees?

The government of my country has introduced several measures that have benefitted women in all sectors. There is equal pay for equal work for men and women. Women are entitled to 'paid maternity leave' of six months on two occasions. There is also a provision of 15 days paternity leave for male employees. Women employees in the government sector are also entitled to about two years childcare leave during their career to take care of sickness and examination needs of the children until the second child is 18 years old. There is also a provision to provide crèche facilities if there are enough women employees at a workplace though it has not been implemented so well for various reasons. Whenever possible, husbands and wives are posted in the same city. It is also mandatory to have an Internal Complaints Committee headed by a woman in a senior position in each organisation for prevention of sexual harassment in the workplace to investigate the complaints of women.

What else do you think can the Government do to support women employees?

I think that the existing policies for the organised sector are quite sufficient and any further incentives may be counterproductive. While recruiting a research fellow for a time-bound project, people try to avoid candidates who are likely to take maternity leave as that would affect the project's progress. More incentives and policies however are needed for women in unorganised sectors such as agricultural employees who work on daily/monthly wages. There is also a need to improve the hostel facilities for girl students and working women. Better day-care facilities for children near the workplace/residence would also help women to join and stay in the workforce. Flexible working hours and work from home facilities shall also be a boon to women with small children.

What is the one thing that you think can remedy gender inequality?

Making the workplace more diverse by recruiting more women, especially in management positions, can be of much help in reducing gender inequality. All facilities to enable women to fulfil their biological responsibilities need to be provided, of course. Providing for such facilities should not be seen only as

a 'support for women' but a support to society as children who are well cared for today will be better citizens tomorrow.

What can an international organization do to recognize and facilitate a reduction in gender bias?

An international organisation can study the experiences of the women in various countries, list the problems they face

— their needs and expectations — and come up with the most important areas that need to be addressed to empower women. It can also the government policies across nations and suggest guidelines that are in line with the biological and social requirements of women. This can encourage women to join and stay in the workforce which in itself will help to mitigate gender bias.



Photograph: Lorena Ruiz, ICAC