



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