



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.