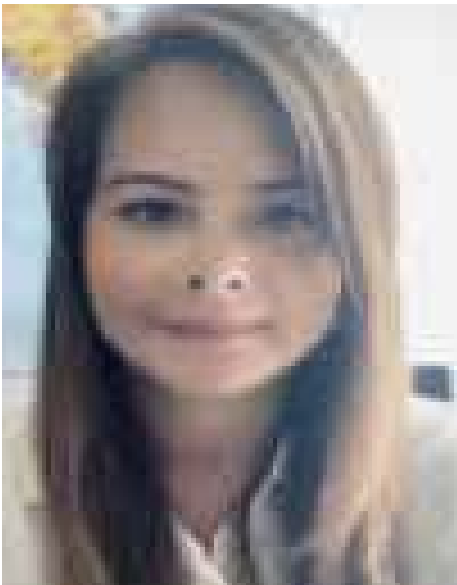




My Mother Inspires Me to Always Stand My Ground and Not Be a Pushover

Rhea Wakefield

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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