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01

The Role of Women in the
Cotton Sector

02

Women in the Cotton Sector in
Latin America

03

Women in Brazilian Cotton

04

Future-Proofing the Cotton Industry:
Gender and Sustainability

05

Transforming Cotton Communities:
Women Farmers

06

Women in Cotton (WiC): Inclusive
Future in the Cotton Industry

07

What Advances Gender Equality in
Cotton Communities

CONTENT



ABOUT US

International Cotton Advisory Committee

The International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) is an organization of currently 20 member countries that share an interest in cotton and the textile value chain. Formed in 1939, it is the only inter-governmental body for cotton producing, consuming, and trading countries and is one of only seven International Commodity Bodies recognized by the United Nations.

ICAC acts as a catalyst for positive change in the cotton and textile value chain by helping member countries and stakeholders support and improve the global cotton economy. ICAC accomplishes its mission by providing transparency to the world cotton market by serving as a clearinghouse for technical information and analysis on cotton production, consumption, and trade and by serving as a forum for discussing and addressing issues of international significance.

The background of the page is a photograph of a cotton plant. On the left, there is a close-up of a cotton boll with red, fuzzy bracts. On the right, there is a blurred view of a cotton field with green leaves and bolls under a bright sky. A large, semi-transparent blue rectangle is centered over the image, containing white text.

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The Role of Women in the Cotton Sector: A Global Analysis



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Introduction

Cotton is a critical agricultural commodity with a significant impact on the global economy, supporting the livelihoods of approximately 24 million farmers and sustaining millions more in the broader textile and apparel industries. Beyond its economic significance, cotton plays a pivotal role in rural communities, shaping the socio-economic landscapes of many countries, particularly in developing regions.

The cotton value chain is extensive, encompassing everything from cultivation and harvesting to processing, manufacturing, and distribution. At

every stage, women play a crucial role as key stakeholders, forming a substantial portion of the workforce. In fact, depending on the region, women contribute an estimated 43% of the labor in cotton production, underscoring their significant impact in the sector. However, despite their crucial role, women in the cotton sector face significant barriers and challenges. Many lack access to essential resources such as land, credit, information, and training, which limits their productivity and hampers their contributions to the value chain.

This article, based on the global survey implemented by the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC)

in 2024, funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and with the collaboration of the +Cotton Project from FAO LAC and the ICA Women in Cotton Initiative (WIC), provides a global and regional analysis of the role of women in the cotton sector. It highlights challenges, opportunities, and strategies to empower women in this industry. The analysis is based on recent survey findings, industry initiatives, and policy recommendations.

Women's Contributions to the Cotton Sector – Results from a Global Survey

To gain a comprehensive understanding of women's roles in the cotton sector, a global survey was conducted from January to September 2024. The survey was designed to capture quantitative and qualitative data from a broad spectrum of industry stakeholders, including cooperatives, industry associations, cotton companies and government bodies.

A total of 158 responses were gathered from 31 countries, ensuring a wide geographical representation. The highest number of responses came from Brazil (53), followed by India (24), and Pakistan (15), indicating strong engagement from key cotton-producing nations. Contributions also came from other major cotton-producing regions such



as Africa, Latin America, North America, and Oceania, providing a balanced perspective on the gender dynamics within the sector.

The methodology of the survey included structured questionnaires distributed online and through direct outreach to key industry players. The survey collected data on women's labor participation, wage disparities, access to resources, decision-making roles, and barriers to empowerment. The findings offer a detailed breakdown of where and how women contribute within cotton production, along with insights into the systemic challenges they continue to face.

• Data Collection in the Cotton Sector: Gaps and Opportunities

Cotton organizations rely heavily on data to monitor production trends, improve efficiency, and inform decision-making. However, survey results reveal a strong bias toward tracking agronomic performance, while financial and market-related aspects receive significantly less attention. The most commonly collected data types include:

- * Production volumes and yield data (82%), reflecting the sector's focus on productivity.
- * Cotton variety (75%), as it directly influences fiber quality characteristics — such

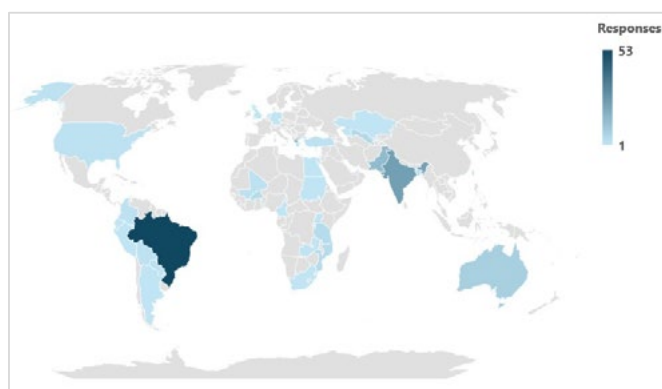


Figure 1. Country Participation in the Survey

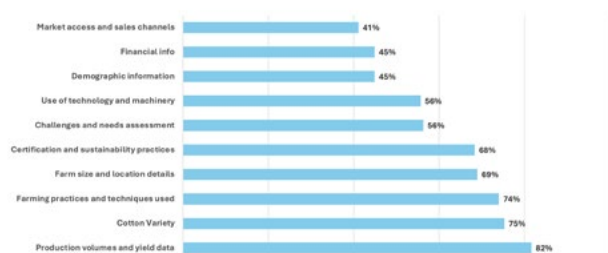


Figure 2. Areas to Data Collection and Reporting

as length, strength, and fineness — and allows for the evaluation of genetic performance under specific growing conditions.

- * Farming practices (74%), emphasizing the importance of sustainable and efficient methods.

At the other end of the spectrum, market access and sales channels are the least recorded indicators, with only 41% of organizations tracking them. Financial data collection is also limited, with just 45% of organizations gathering financial insights. These trends indicate a missed opportunity to understand how cotton producers, particularly women, engage with markets and secure economic stability.

• The Need for Better Data on Women's Inclusion

Despite growing recognition of women's contributions to the cotton sector, 45.6% of organizations do not collect data specifically related to women's participation. This lack of disaggregated information limits the ability to develop targeted actions and assess the effectiveness of policies aimed at addressing

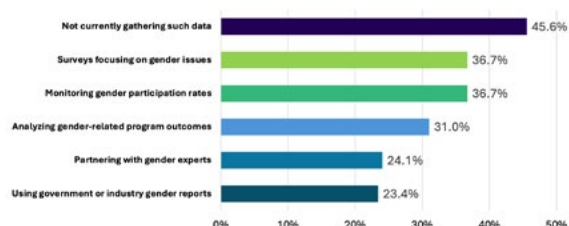


Figure 3. Collection and Usage of Gender-Specific

disparities in pay, access to resources, and leadership opportunities.

Among those that do collect relevant data, efforts remain limited in scope. 37% monitor participation rates, and another 37% conduct surveys related to the roles of men and women in the sector, but these approaches often provide only a basic understanding of the issues. Only 31% of organizations analyze program outcomes by demographic group, which is essential for understanding the actual impact of policies and initiatives. Just 24% partner with external experts on workforce composition, and only 23% use government or industry reports—highlighting missed opportunities to strengthen strategies with existing resources.

Without more detailed insights into the roles and experiences of both men and women in the cotton sector, organizations struggle to identify wage gaps, understand barriers to advancement, and design evidence-based strategies to foster broader participation across the value chain.

• Overview of Workplace Policies and Practices Implemented by Organizations

The data on workplace policies implemented by organizations globally reveals varying

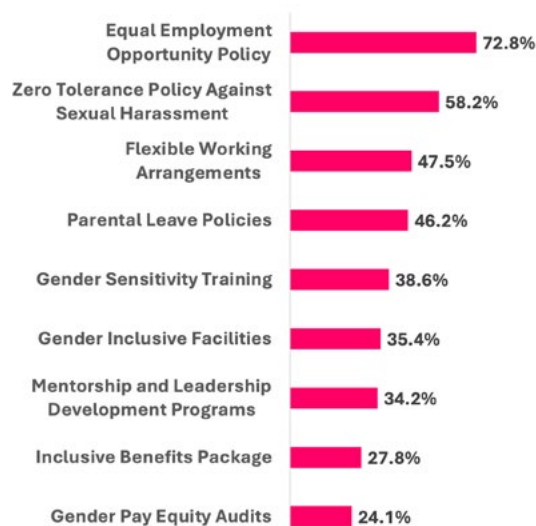


Figure 4. Collection and Usage of Gender-Specific



levels of commitment to fair and supportive work environments. While many organizations have taken steps to establish foundational policies, efforts must be strengthened to fully integrate fair and inclusive practices into all aspects of organizational operations. Equal Employment Opportunity Policies (72.8%) and Zero Tolerance Policies against Sexual Harassment (58.2%) are the most widely adopted, reflecting a strong emphasis on basic protections and professional standards.

However, other practices aimed at improving workplace culture and support systems are less common. Flexible Working Arrangements (47.5%) and Parental Leave Policies (46.2%) show moderate uptake. Training on respectful behavior and communication (38.6%) and access to appropriate workplace facilities for all employees (35.4%) remain limited in implementation.

The adoption of mentorship and leadership development programs (34.2%) remains low, representing a missed opportunity to

strengthen internal talent pipelines. Just 27.8% of organizations offer comprehensive benefits packages that reflect a broader range of employee needs. Only 24.1% of organizations conduct pay equity audits, indicating limited efforts to monitor or address potential disparities in compensation.

• Policies and Approaches for Non-Discrimination, Fair Pay, and Health Access

The data on the implementation of non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies, along with organizational approaches to fair compensation, reflects significant progress toward building more consistent and transparent workplace practices in the cotton sector. A total of 89.2% of organizations report having established non-discrimination and equal opportunity policies, suggesting that these principles are now widely recognized and embedded across the sector. This commitment supports global frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5), which emphasize the elimination of discriminatory practices. Similarly, 90.5% of organizations report having an approach in place to ensure fair compensation for both men and women. An additional 1.9% plan to implement such measures in the coming year, while 7% are either taking initial steps or have expressed interest in doing so. These figures indicate

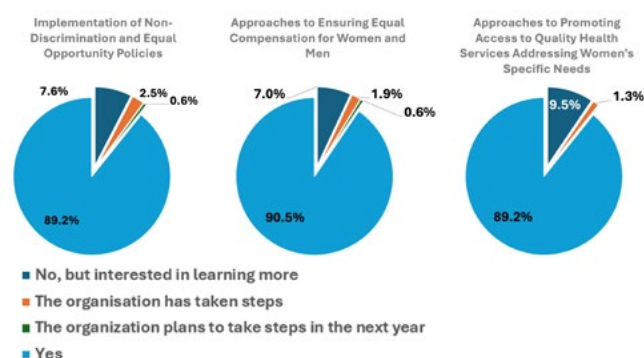


Figure 5. Policies, Equal Pay, and Health Access

growing attention to wage alignment and fairness across roles and employee groups. The data also show progress in supporting employee health, with 89% of organizations confirming that they have an approach in place to promote access to quality health services for women. This reflects a broader organizational commitment to workforce well-being and aligns with international standards, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3, which promotes good health and well-being for all.

• Representation of Women in Executive and Management Roles

Organizations in the cotton sector were asked what percentage of their executive and management positions are held by women. The responses show that while some companies have made progress, many still have very low levels of female representation in leadership.

More than one-third of organizations (35.4%) reported that women hold 10% or less of leadership roles:

- 23.4% said women make up only 1%–5% of leadership,
- 12.0% reported 6%–10%.

Another 8.9% of organizations said women hold 11%–15%, and 17.1% reported 16%–30%, showing moderate levels of participation in some companies.

On the more positive side, 22.2% of organi-

zations said women hold 31%–50% of executive or management positions, and 16.5% reported a female majority, with women holding more than half of leadership roles. Research shows that having more balanced leadership teams can bring real business benefits. A Boston Consulting Group study found that companies with diverse management teams generate 19% more revenue from innovation. Other studies have linked stronger female representation in leadership to better financial results and improved risk management.

As the saying goes, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a village.” Increasing women’s participation in leadership is not only a matter of representation — it has the potential to drive meaningful change across organizations, communities, and entire sectors.

• Key Improvements Needed in the Cotton Sector

Responses on how to improve cotton sector programs highlight the need for broad, systemic changes rather than isolated efforts. Stakeholders emphasize that tackling existing imbalances requires structural reforms that go beyond surface-level adjustments.

Raising awareness of disparities was identified as the most urgent priority. Respondents view awareness as the foundation for

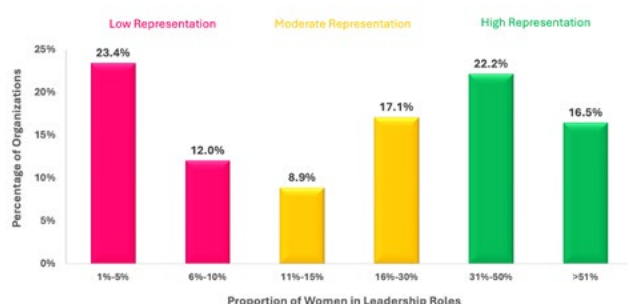


Figure 6. Female Representation in Executive and Management Roles Across Organizations

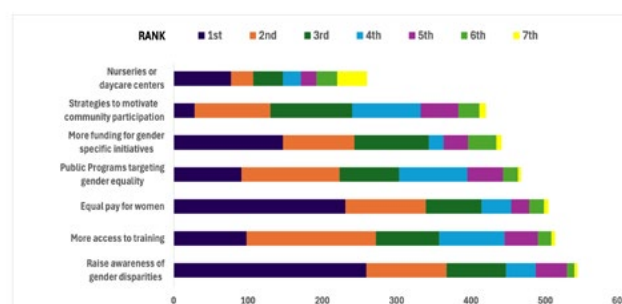


Figure 7. Priority Areas for Improvement in the Cotton Sector

action — creating a culture where unequal access to resources, leadership roles, and decision-making cannot be ignored. This aligns with global development frameworks, including guidance from organizations like FAO, which underscore that sustainable progress begins with informed, engaged institutions.

Access to training follows closely as a key area for improvement. Respondents recognize that advancing women in the sector depends on building skills and capabilities. Barriers to education and training continue to limit women's participation and career growth. Expanding training opportunities is seen as essential for increasing productivity, preparing women for leadership, and strengthening the sector overall.

The issue of equal pay remains a central concern. Despite global attention to wage gaps, many organizations in the cotton sector have yet to implement concrete measures to address them. Ensuring fair compensation for equal work is viewed as a necessary step toward creating a level playing field and recognizing all contributions equally.

Respondents also highlight the role of public programs and government policies in driving long-term change. Institutional support is seen as essential to establish frameworks that guide and reinforce organizational practices. Well-designed, well-funded public



initiatives can accelerate progress across the sector.

Community participation strategies — such as forming local women's groups — are recognized as meaningful ways to foster dialogue, build peer support, and strengthen engagement at the grassroots level. These efforts help amplify voices, surface local challenges, and create space for collective problem-solving. They also contribute to shifting mindsets and promoting greater visibility of women in decision-making spaces. What we see shapes what we believe is possible — when women are visible, others are more likely to see themselves as capable of leading too.

Lastly, childcare services — such as nurseries and daycare centers — are recognized as important tools to help women balance work and family responsibilities. They are viewed as part of a long-term support system that can contribute to greater stability, participation, and continuity in the workforce.



• Distribution of Women's Roles in Cotton Production and Related Activities

Women's participation in cotton production varies significantly across tasks, with notable concentrations in manual labor and lower representation in technical, leadership, and decision-making roles. Survey data reveal a consistent pattern of underrepresentation tied to structural barriers, particularly limited access to resources, training, and leadership opportunities.

ACTIVITIES AND RESULTS

- ◇ **Access to Resources:** Just 29.7% of women report having access to productive resources, while 70.3% of men do. This imbalance affects everything from input access to autonomy over production decisions and limits opportunities to move into more technical or strategic roles.
- ◇ **Pre-Planting Activities:** Participation drops to 22.5% when it comes to land preparation and input planning. Control over early-stage decisions — linked to assets like seeds, tools, and capital — remains mostly in the hands of men.
- ◇ **Planting Phase:** Involvement rises to 31.1%, reflecting women's contribution to labor-intensive planting tasks. However, their influence over when, how, and what to plant is limited, with strategic planning still largely outside their reach.
- ◇ **Growing Season Management:** At 18.1%, women's participation dips further during the critical growing period. This stage often demands technical knowledge and access to extension services — areas where women remain at a disadvantage.
- ◇ **Harvesting:** Only 23.3% of women are



involved in marketing — the gateway to markets and revenue streams. The influence over when and where cotton is sold remains concentrated, reinforcing gendered control of economic outcomes.

- ◇ **Post-Harvest Activities:** Involvement drops to 19.1% in post-harvest handling, including storage and processing. These tasks require equipment and logistical planning, underscoring the persistent barriers to women's engagement in value-added roles.
- ◇ **Ginning:** Women make up 24.6% of those involved in the ginning stage — where cotton fibers are separated from seeds. The technical and machinery-heavy nature of this work remains a hurdle for many, shaped by unequal access to training and technology.
- ◇ **Marketing:** Only 23.3% of women are involved in marketing — the gateway to markets and revenue streams. The influence over when and where cotton is sold

remains concentrated, reinforcing gendered control of economic outcomes.

- ◇ **Cotton Quality and Grading:** With 26.1% participation, women have limited roles in quality evaluation — a key step in determining value and price. Their underrepresentation in this area means reduced influence over quality standards and market competitiveness.
- ◇ **Education and Training:** Women account for 27.0% of participants in training programs, reflecting uneven access to learning opportunities that build technical expertise, confidence, and career mobility in the cotton sector.
- ◇ **Cooperatives and Leadership:** Women's involvement in leadership activities within cotton cooperatives is reported at 24.7%, compared to 75.3% for men. As cooperatives often serve as key hubs for organizing production, negotiating prices, and influencing policy, women's limited participation in these roles restricts their voice in shaping decisions that affect their livelihoods and communities.

is a critical part of this shift, along with increasing participation in marketing, technical activities, and decision-making. These changes will contribute to a more efficient and resilient production system.

Sustained progress also depends on strong monitoring and reporting. Regular assessments at both the organizational and individual levels can help identify where improvements are taking place and where challenges persist. These mechanisms support data-informed decision-making, more targeted action, and long-term accountability across the sector.

By taking focused steps to reduce these gaps, the cotton sector can improve productivity, strengthen supply chains, and ensure more consistent outcomes for everyone involved in production. A more balanced distribution of roles and responsibilities is not only beneficial, it is essential to the long-term strength and adaptability of the sector.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The findings of the Women in the Cotton Sector survey reveal a complex but hopeful picture: while women continue to face structural barriers in access, training, leadership, and recognition, there is a growing commitment across the sector to close these gaps. Progress is possible — and underway — but there is a need to accelerate practical, results-driven action.

Strengthening the sector means unlocking talent that remains underutilized. This involves expanding access to tools, knowledge, and opportunities that enable individuals to take on broader roles across the value chain. Promoting women's leadership, particularly within cooperatives and producer groups,





Women in the Cotton Sector in Latin America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Gender Equality Initiatives



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Introduction

The role of women in the cotton sector of Latin America has historically been underrecognized despite their vital contributions¹. In response to this oversight, a global survey was conducted to better understand the roles, challenges, and opportunities faced by women in this industry. This

article presents relevant ongoing initiatives for gender equality as the +Cotton Project and the Latin American Network of Cotton Women, summarizes key findings from the survey, and outlines achievements and recommendations for fostering gender equality in the cotton sector.

¹ Women in Cotton. Gender roles and participation in value chains in Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru (FAO 2017) <https://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/es/c/888184/>

The context: Gender disparities in Latin America Cotton Sector

The cotton sector in Latin America has the face of family farming and, in this context, a series of challenges are part of the equality agenda, demanding decisive actions that are often disregarded in public policies. There are currently gender inequalities in access to means of production, decent employment opportunities, education, health services and social protection. Despite women play a key role in agriculture and agrifood systems, gender gaps in ownership and control of resources and economic opportunities constrain rural women from being fully productive, with negative consequences for their incomes and access to adequate food (FAO, 2023)¹.



Women's access to land, inputs, services, financial means and digital technology are essential for working in agri-food systems. However, access to public goods remains a challenge, particularly in areas such as: a) access to rural services and land ownership. It is critical the gap in relation to women's access to extension services, irrigation, land and livestock ownership in the last decade; b) access to digital technologies and financial services. Although it is encouraging that the gap is narrowing in terms of their access

to financial services, the Internet and mobile phones, there is a long way to go towards equal opportunities in the countryside; c) The historical wage gap, where the reality shows that women earn on average 18.4% less than men in wage employment in agriculture (FAO 2023); this means that they receive 82 cents for every 1USD that men earn. The percentage of women who own their land does not reach 30% in traditional cotton producing countries, such as Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay, showing a restricted access to property ownership.

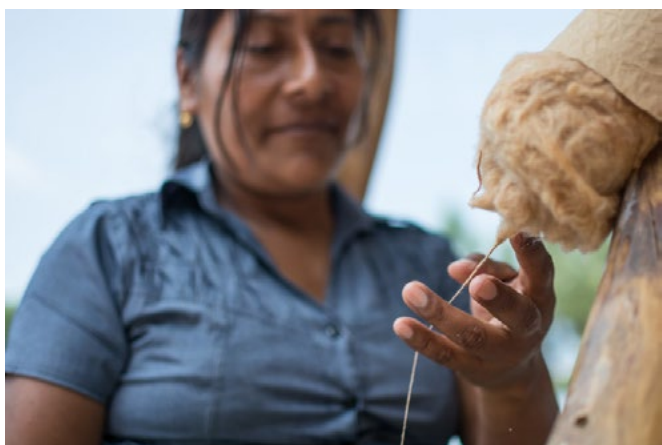
Gender disparities in the Latin American cotton sector reflect the historical difference that is strongly present in the rural areas, confirming the urgency of public policies to be inclusive, widely offered and built because of the diverse reality in the territory. Progressing in reducing gender disparities will contribute to more sustainable development processes on different continents and movements such as the Latin American Cotton Women's Network, the Latin American and Caribbean Women's Network, and the Agroligadas movement in Brazil; those are examples of how social organization is vital to socio-productive empowerment, under a win-win approach.

The +Cotton Project: Empowering the roles of rural women in LAC Region

The +Cotton Project² is a south-south co-operation initiative implemented by the Brazilian Government through de Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC/MRE), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and six countries of Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru) established with the purpose of strengthening the cotton

¹ The status of women in agrifood systems (FAO 2024) <https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/ad0741f-9de2-4d09-ae68-b19cc871601a>

² + Cotton Project Website <https://www.fao.org/in-action/program-brazil-fao/projects/cotton-sector/ru/>



sector in the region, including the socio-productive chain of women and men in cotton family agriculture, through the exchange of best practices and knowledge.

The project supports the implementation of initiatives aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Its target audience includes women engaged in various roles within the cotton industry, such as producers, artisans, technicians, and professionals working in cotton companies, textile factories, and public institutions.

As a part of the +Cotton project, a gender mainstreaming strategy has been developed since the beginning of its implementation, which includes as a fundamental step the recognition of the reality and value of women and men cotton producers in the partner countries, identifying their key roles along the cotton chain; therefore, quantitative and qualitative studies have been carried out on the current situation and existing gender

gaps. In addition, with the support of Brazilian institutions, activities are being implemented to improve the capacities of women in the different roles they occupy throughout the sector. The +Cotton gender strategy aims to:

1. To make visible the roles, needs, resources and capacities of women and men throughout the cotton chain (studies, surveys, diagnostics).
2. Raise awareness and train decision-makers and public policy implementers to integrate a gender perspective in the design and implementation of their work.
3. To generate advocacy in the formulation of public policies to promote equal participation between men and women.
4. Incorporation of women in training activities and productive organization, as well as in decision-making on issues that directly affect them for their social and economic empowerment.



+ Cotton project supports the empowering women economically through fair trade and strengthening the cotton value chain; promote gender equality and effective participation in policymaking; enhance digital literacy among rural women involved in cotton production and craftsmanship and developed socioeconomic innovations based on the needs of women in the sector facilitating social and economic inclusion for thousands of women across different cotton-producing regions in Latin America.





Latin American Network of Cotton Women

This initiative arose from the recognition, by public and private institutions in the sector, of the need to promote initiatives to develop gender-sensitive value chains that result in benefits for women and for the competitiveness of the cotton chain in general.

The objective of the network is to be a collective space to advance an agenda of training and education, where the rights of rural women, artisans and leaders in the cotton sector are strengthened, contributing to the valorization of their livelihoods and making more visible their strategic roles throughout the cotton value chain.

Members of this network include public agencies for the promotion of handicrafts, associations and groups of craftswomen, international organizations, Ministries of Agriculture, researchers, technicians, business-

women and men, entrepreneurs, designers and other public-private stakeholders. At least 500 women participated of the network activities. The net, also have local chapters as the Argentinian Net of Cotton Women .

FAO, through the +Cotton project, supports the network's secretariat in the implementation of its annual work plan including capacity building initiatives and generation of key data and technical documents about women in Latin America cotton sector.

The Global Survey on Women in the Cotton Sector: Chapter Americas

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), through the +Cotton project implemented jointly with the Brazilian government, the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), and the International Cotton Association's "Women in Cotton Committee", the "Global Survey of the Role of Women in the Cotton Sector." This initiative aims to comprehensively measure women's vital contributions, challenges, and opportunities in the sector across cotton producing and consuming countries. The survey covered multiple areas of interest, including education, income, access to technology, financial resources, and leadership opportunities.

Methodology

The survey was applied through an online form to be answered anonymously during the second semester of 2023, setting as target audience women belonging to the cotton chain who play roles as producers, artisans, technicians; who are part of cotton companies, associations, warehouses and logistics, cotton gins, merchants, textile factories,





clothing factories, brands and public institutions, among other profiles of relevance to the cotton chain.

A total of 147 surveys were answered from North America, Central America and South America; the data collection form was made available in Spanish, English and Portuguese. It is important to note that the last global survey on gender gaps and the roles of women in the sector was conducted by the International Trade Center (ITC) in 2011³; at that time, the effort to collect and analyze data focused on the regions of Africa and Asia, with the specific participation of just three Latin American countries.

The results revealed significant gender disparities and challenges that women face in the sector, explained below.

Gender disparities and challenges that women face in the cotton sector

Public Policy and Gender Inclusion

- Only 13% of women have benefited from public policies in the past three years.
- Key priorities for public funding include fostering community participation (41%) and conducting diagnostic studies to map regional challenges (39%).

³ Women In Cotton Results Of A Global Survey (ITC 2011) https://www.intracen.org/sites/default/files/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Publications/women_in_cotton_low_res.pdf

Strategies for Gender Equality Promotion

- 61% of respondents advocate for improved access to opportunities and resources for women.
- 59% emphasize the need for greater female representation in leadership roles.
- 40% support the implementation of policies and programs that promote gender equality.

Work Conditions: Paid and Unpaid Labor

- 56% of the participants work between 31 to 50 hours per week in paid jobs.
- 34% spend between 21 to 50 hours per week on unpaid domestic labor, highlighting the double burden faced by women in balancing professional and household responsibilities.

Impact of Climate Change and Digitalization

- Water resource security is a major issue, along with the need for integrated pest management strategies.
- While most women have access to mobile devices, rural women face a significant digital divide, particularly in using essential software like Microsoft Office.





Employment, Discrimination, and Leadership

- 74% of respondents have observed or experienced workplace discrimination, mainly related to wage gaps, exclusion from managerial positions, and excessive workloads.
- Women's participation in leadership roles remains low, with few holding executive positions.

Financial Access, Associativity and Capacity Building

- Only 27% of women have applied for financial credit, limiting their economic growth and productivity.
- Access to technical training remains low, with only 22% of respondents having received professional development support in the past five years.
- Women's associative efforts remain weak, with only 8% of participants engaged in formal group associations.

Education and Economic Independence

- Urban women generally have a higher level of education, with 45% holding post-graduate degrees, whereas rural women have a lower educational level, with only

32% completing undergraduate studies.

- A large percentage (74%) of the women surveyed reported economic independence, with personal income derived from salaries, rent, or property ownership.

Recommendations

To address the challenges highlighted in the survey, efforts must be directed in two ways; for one side, supporting initiatives to improve **Practical Needs**, understood as those that enhance social conditions by improving access to basic services and financial support for women in the cotton sector; on the other hand, support **Strategic Interests**, to strengthen women's rights through legal frameworks and institutional support for gender equality. These two areas must be approach also through four spheres:

- **Personal Sphere:** To promote individual empowerment through education and leadership training.
- **Household Sphere:** To encourage the fair distribution of domestic responsibilities.



- **Community Sphere:** To foster women's associations and cooperative efforts.
- **Organizational Sphere:** To implement policies that facilitate gender-inclusive workplaces.

- **Policy and Legislative Sphere:** To advocate for governmental support to create and enforce policies aimed at gender equality in the cotton sector.

Conclusion

Women play an essential role in Latin America's cotton value chain, yet they continue to face systemic challenges that limit their full participation and economic empowerment. The cotton sector presents significant gender gaps, such as access to positions of power and lower income, a scenario in which it becomes more crucial to generate statistics to promote the exchange of knowledge, the mobilization of resources and initiatives, and the focusing of institutional efforts for the effective participation of women throughout the chain.

The +Cotton Project has made significant strides in addressing these issues by promot-

ing gender equality and digital literacy, improving economic opportunities, and supporting policy changes. However, sustained efforts are needed to close gender gaps in employment, leadership, and financial access. By implementing the recommended strategies, stakeholders can help create a more inclusive and equitable cotton sector for all women involved.

Initiatives as the global survey contributed to the generation of strategic information, collecting data that allows the different institutions involved and actors in the sector to identify the roles that women play, the challenges present for gender equality, and to lay the foundations for monitoring the progress of women in the global cotton sector. Equality in the cotton sector will contribute to constructing a sustainable cotton sector and improve the development of countries which have cotton as a key value chain.





Women in Brazilian Cotton: A Long Journey Toward Equality



ALESSANDRA
ZANOTTO COSTA

President, ABAPA

Alessandra Zanotto Costa is a rural producer and managing partner at Grupo Zanotto. Over the years, she has strengthened her leadership in agribusiness and become a prominent advocate for greater female participation in decision-making roles. She is a member of the Women in Cotton committee at the International Cotton Association (ICA) and Forbes Mulher Agro, part of Forbes Brasil. In January 2025, she became president of the Ba-

hia Cotton Producers Association (Abapa), after serving as vice president and holding other leadership positions within the organization. She has also served as first fiscal advisor at the Brazilian Association of Cotton Producers (Abrapa). As the head of Grupo Zanotto, Alessandra has built her leadership around the principles of economic, environmental, and social sustainability, as well as strong governance.



The cotton supply chain is vast and complex, involving many women, particularly beyond the farm gates in fiber processing and garment manufacturing. In Brazil, these segments — employing approximately 1.3 million people — provide around 60% of formal jobs for women. However, in cotton production itself, where Brazil continues to expand as the world's leading supplier, women remain underrepresented, especially in decision-making roles.

According to the Brazilian Association of Cotton Producers (Abrapa), during the 2023/2024 season, farms certified under the Responsible Brazilian Cotton (ABR) program generated 41,000 direct jobs in cotton production. Of these, only 4,891 positions — less than 10% — were held by women. A closer look at the numbers, particularly in terms of hierarchy and decision-making power, reveals an even greater gender disparity. In Bahia, Brazil's second-largest cotton-producing state, there is still much work



to be done to ensure greater female leadership in the sector.

As a woman who has risen to the presidency of the Bahia Cotton Producers Association (Abapa), manages my family's business at Grupo Zanotto, and actively participates in key industry forums such as Women in Cotton at the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), I recognize that my journey is both emblematic and an inspiration for other women. Yet, at the same time, I remain an exception rather than the norm and that should not be the case.

My path was shaped by circumstances. As the second of two daughters in a family without male heirs, my father had no choice but to consider female successors. However, this inevitability did not make my journey easier. Convincing my father, Dionísio, to value my input in business decisions required persistence, and the same was true for every step of my career in the cotton industry. Overcoming these challenges and developing resilience has shaped who I am today. But as long as women must still fight for gender equality, we are far from achieving a truly inclusive and fair environment.



That said, there is progress to celebrate. Every victory, no matter how small, contributes to reshaping the history of Brazil's cotton industry. I am the second woman to lead Abapa, an organization that has long been committed to closing the gender gap in Bahia's



cotton sector, starting from within. A look at our leadership structure shows that change is happening, with increasing participation from women of the second generation of pioneering families, like myself, helping to shape the future of cotton in Bahia and across Brazil.

Abapa has been at the forefront of this transformation by offering specialized professional training courses for women, equipping them to work in cotton agribusiness and agriculture more broadly. These programs include training in areas where women's presence was once rare, such as operating and maintaining agricultural machinery—tractors, harvesters, and forklifts—as well as cotton classification.

Since the establishment of Abapa's Training and Technology Center (CT) in 2010, more than 3,000 women have benefited from its courses, demonstrating our institution's commitment to inclusion and diversity. To further enhance this effort, the CT has offered women-only training programs since 2021, with over 15 cohorts and more than 160 women gaining new skills through tailored instruction. These initiatives are particularly impactful for women living near agricultural hubs like Western Bahia, a ma-

jor cotton and food production region that relies on a highly skilled workforce. Access to training and education enhances employability and income opportunities for women, helping to bridge gender gaps and drive regional socioeconomic development.

Equally significant is Abapa's engagement in industry events that encourage reflection on the role of women as agents of change and value creation. These discussions not only highlight new opportunities and perspectives but also strengthen a powerful network of women in the sector. They have also encouraged many women who were hesitant to step forward and showcase their talents, proving that, as the saying goes, "leadership by example is powerful."

However, lasting engagement must be sustainable, which means it must also be economically viable. It is unacceptable for men and women performing the same roles to be paid differently. Even if wage disparities are addressed, true equality will not be achieved unless women's contributions are equally valued and recognized. Cultural and structural barriers that limit female participation in cotton production must be dismantled through incentive policies embedded in corporate and industry governance, alongside the creation of real opportunities for women to thrive.

Here in Bahia, we already see inspiring examples of women leading farms, managing



teams, and driving innovation in various areas of cotton production. These women — whether business leaders, researchers, machine operators, or entrepreneurs — are breaking stereotypes and making the cotton industry increasingly diverse and inclusive. I firmly believe that gender equality is not just a pathway to progress but one of the most crucial factors for the sector's advancement. Companies that embrace diversity are more productive and innovative. Farms that incorporate women's perspectives in decision-making are more efficient and sustainable. Brazilian cotton, recognized worldwide for its quality, stands to gain immensely from greater balance and inclusion. When more women hold strategic positions and contribute to decision-making in farms and industries, the entire sector strengthens, improving efficiency across the supply chain and reinforcing Brazil's status as a global leader in sustainable, high-quality cotton production. Women's participation in the cotton sector should not be seen merely as a social issue but as a strategic imperative for competitiveness and development.

For this reason, we must continue investing in concrete actions. Strengthening support networks for women in agribusiness, encouraging technical and academic training, and ensuring that future generations of young girls see cotton production as a promising career path are all critical steps. One day, gender equality will no longer be a topic of discussion because it will be a reality. While new challenges will arise, men and women in the cotton industry — in Bahia, Brazil, and beyond — will face them together, guided by talent and qualifications rather than gender. Until then, we must continue building the foundation for the inclusive future we envision for cotton production. As much as we might like to forget it, we cannot ignore history: cotton played a pivotal role in the origins of International Women's Day, a date commemorating the struggles and injustices faced by female textile workers who dared to demand their rights. For them, for us, and for those who will come after, we must continue working to ensure that, one day, this date serves only as a distant reminder of a battle that was won.





Future-Proofing the Cotton Industry: Why Gender Equality and the Sustainability Transition Must Progress in Tandem



ALISON WARD

CEO, CottonConnect

Alison Ward is CEO of CottonConnect, bringing over 30 years of international experience in sustainability and corporate affairs. She leads a team of 140+ employees, supporting over 800,000 cotton farmers across Asia and North Africa. Under her leadership, CottonConnect advances supply chain transparency, promotes women's rights through gender programs, and drives farm-level innovation for global brands and retailers.

Women make up nearly half (46%) of the estimated 31.5 million farmers who grow cotton around the world. In terms of gender equality, this headline statistic may sound heartening but the reality on the ground is not so progressive. Traditionally, in the countries we work (India, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Turkey and Egypt), men are seen as the primary farmers, while women tend to be viewed as farmhands or the farmers' wives.

As the interlinked climate and biodiversity crises escalate, rising temperatures, changing rain patterns, water scarcity, flooding and wildlife extinction are creating multiple difficulties for cotton farmers. From our on-the-ground experience, we have observed that, unfortunately, patriarchal norms

tend to limit women's ability to have any real influence over the introduction of new sustainable practices and adaptive solutions to make cotton agriculture more resilient unless they are specifically trained or engaged.

All too often, women are denied decision-making powers and land ownership. Moreover, their responsibility for domestic and family caring duties alongside their farm work means they are extremely time poor, restricting their opportunities for training and skill development. This societal context is holding back both women and cotton farming's transition to more sustainable practices – but also creates a vital opportunity to advance them in tandem.

Placing women at the forefront of climate mitigation and adaptation

In the cotton growing year 2023 to 2024 alone, we at CottonConnect trained over 452,000 farmers across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Egypt and Türkiye. Our experience and related research show that it's crucial to support women agricultural workers to lead on effective climate strategies.

According to a UN Report *Why women are key to climate action* | United Nations women are more affected by climate change than men. Worldwide the UN estimates that four out of five people displaced by the impact of climate change are women and girls. Their position on the frontline of the climate emergency means that women can act as agents of change when it comes to finding ways of mitigating the causes of global warming and adapting to its impacts on the ground.

The UN also highlights that women as the traditional custodians of indigenous knowledge often have an understanding of local biodiversity that aligns with sustainable practices.

We believe that with this long-term forward looking approach to land stewardship, women can be critical leaders when it comes to building climate-resilient agricultural systems.



Women farmers leading the way

Some change is already happening and a more positive story emerges from the field insights and interactions recorded by our teams on the ground. Our recent report *Women In Cotton: Experiences from Women Mitigating the Effects of Climate Change* — CottonConnect shows that women are actively engaged in, and often lead, all critical stages of cotton cultivation: from land preparation and planting to harvesting and post-harvest management. Changes in society are also changing women's status, in India, for example, women farmers have told us that the increasing number of men migrating to cities for better livelihoods has led to the 'feminisation' of agriculture, with women finally being viewed by their communities as lead farmers.

Through a series of focus group discussions and a stakeholder roundtable, we explored how sharing knowledge and training on climate mitigation as part of Women in Cotton initiatives and our REEL Regenerative agronomic programme have supported women in adopting climate-smart agricultural practices, overcoming barriers to resources and training, and strengthening their roles in leadership and decision-making. The discussions with women farmers and in-country experts revealed that:



1. **Women are benefiting from climate training programmes** - Climate training has strengthened women's understanding of climate change, giving them greater control over their land and decisions.
2. **Targeted agricultural practices** such as intercropping, water conservation, agro-forestry, and biopesticides, can support climate change mitigation while improving farm yields.
3. **Climate-friendly practices implemented on farms also help to protect people's health** by reducing exposure to harmful chemicals through natural pest control, bio-fertilizers, and bio-pesticides.
4. **Community and systemic change** - Despite societal barriers, training has shifted perceptions, fostering greater recognition of women as farmers and climate leaders.

These findings reflect on how our training programmes are working and emphasise why we cannot afford to overlook women as the target for support. This includes ad-



ressing the barriers to participation such as cultural gender norms, domestic duties, mobility restrictions and limited credit access. Instead of blocking women's contributions, we must clear the way for them to go even further.

Women in Cotton

For the past ten years, CottonConnect has been running the Women in Cotton programme, which has been at the forefront of supporting women farmers and enabling them to switch to more sustainable practices. It began in 2015 as a small extension to one of our agronomic farm programmes but has evolved into a key focus for our entire social enterprise. Its aim is to foster entrepreneurship, climate action and leadership among women in cotton farming communities by building their knowledge, strengthening their livelihoods and connecting them to new markets.

In practice, the programme provides women agricultural workers with training in literacy, numeracy, rights and health – with a view to increasing their income opportunities, both within cotton production and through running supplementary enterprises. In the cotton farming year 2023 to 2024, 270,863 women participated in the programme, taking us closer towards our goal of training half a million women by 2030.



An example of this work is our first Women in Cotton programme in Egypt, which started in November 2023. We trained 25 women who work in rural cotton fields in microfinance, business management and advanced farming techniques. In a short period of time, the women acquired crucial knowledge and skills that can improve their livelihoods. The results showed that the women greatly increased their: awareness of Egypt's cotton trading system (from 12% to 100%); ability to participate in the cotton buying and selling market (from 24% to 100%); and ability to identify the symptoms of micro-deficiency in their cotton crop (96% after training).

Women Climate Change Ambassadors

In 2022, we set up our Women Climate Change Ambassadors programme to empower women farmers as change leaders in climate resilience. It focuses on training women in climate-smart agriculture practices and adaptation techniques. The programme involved 42 women farmers from districts in Gujarat, India. Their training covered: an introduction to climate change; its effects on agriculture and cotton productivity; the role of gender in climate change; and knowledge of climate-smart agricultural practices. The aim was to help the women understand what rising temperatures and chemical soil inputs were doing to their cotton yields and how they could take preventative action. These change leaders subsequently trained 30 farmers each, imparting the knowledge to over 1,200 women.

The training is ongoing, and we are constantly improving it through feedback from participants. It is clear that by giving women the knowledge and tools about regenerative farmer practices and by giving them a clear

mandate in their community we are able to support women's empowerment and we hope that of the next generation.

A fantastic example from our Women Climate Change Ambassadors programme is Vilashben Dineshbhai Tadavi, who works on her two-acre smallholding in Tilakwada, in the Narmada district of Gujarat. She had found herself caught in a cycle of excessive chemical fertiliser and pesticide usage, without fully understanding its impact on her crops and the environment. The overuse of these inputs led to soil deterioration, reduced fertility and the loss of biodiversity. Additionally, it increased production costs and caused her financial difficulties.

Everything changed when Vilashben underwent our training. She became acutely aware of how her agricultural practices were impacting nature and the climate – connecting her excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides to declining insect and bird numbers on her farm. She also learnt that the uncontrolled overuse of chemical inputs releases greenhouse gases.

As a result, Vilashben implemented more



Vilashben Dineshbhai Tadavi

sustainable practices on her farm, including integrated nutrient management to replenish the health of the soil. To replace fertilisers and pesticides, she prepared natural homemade bio-inputs – such as vermicompost, a specific mix of local leaves, and cow dung and urine mixed with water. During the cotton season of 2022 to 2023, she applied them to her fields with remarkable results. Not only did she reduce her external input costs by 20%, but the cotton production also improved significantly.

Recognising the financial and environmental benefits of these natural methods, Vilashben now sticks to them. Over the long-term, her use of homemade inputs will gradually boost the populations of useful microorganisms in her soil, improving its fertility and reinvigorating wider biodiversity. She is also passing her newfound knowledge on to other women, five of whom have made the switch to natural agricultural inputs too.



Beyond the fields

Of course, we must not forget that women play a pivotal role across the entire cotton supply chain – not just at the farm level. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), nearly 60% of garment workers globally are women. Addressing barriers to their inclusion must, therefore, extend to other processes in the complex cotton supply chain from ginning and spinning to textile production.

At CottonConnect, we've established a Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) framework to guide best practices for a safe workplace for employees, local partners and other stakeholders. Based on recommendations by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as well as the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, our process begins with a baseline assessment of existing practices. It then introduces robust response frameworks to prevent or mitigate adverse impacts. This might include the appointment of a Child Protection Officer, introducing helplines and educating women on their rights.

In 2023, we also developed a Code of Conduct specifically for cotton gins. It is designed to raise the standards on safety, health and hygiene as well as advocate for the statutory rights of workers and includes specific guidelines around women focused training to ensure fair treatment of female gin workers and safeguard against discrimination in terms of health, wages and working hours. Its implementation across India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Türkiye in 2023 – 2024 saw a significant increase in safety compliance from 42% to 87%. Thus, demonstrating the power of clear guidelines.

Next steps

As climate change and social inequality impact global systems, we need to reimagine cotton supply chains to make them more sustainable and inclusive. Advancing gender equality is a key means of driving this transition. Women's hard work has not only been undervalued but their potential contribution disregarded. At CottonConnect, we believe women are key to the sustainability revolution, which is why we are only just getting started when it comes to supporting them.

To further advance gender equality and the uptake of sustainable agricultural practices, all cotton production stakeholders need to amplify women's voices. We can only create a sustainable and equitable cotton sector in which women across the supply chain are fully valued by first understanding their unique perspectives, experiences and chal-



lenges. The way forward is then through education programmes tailored specifically to their geographic and cultural contexts, showing them sustainable agricultural practices that are also commercially rewarding, as well as educating them on their rights.

The inclusion of women in supply chains, from farm to end-garment, is about harnessing the full potential of our workforce to drive positive systemic change that benefits everyone — striving towards a more equitable and sustainable future, where no one is left behind and our sector is preserved for the long-term.





Transforming Cotton Farming Communities, One Woman Farmer at a Time



ORGANIC COTTON ACCELERATOR

Organic Cotton Accelerator is a multi-stakeholder organisation advancing farmer prosperity whilst creating a transparent, resilient, and responsible organic cotton supply chain.

Tarsila, a cotton farmer in her 60's from Mohancot village in India, has spent much of her life caring for others. As a nurse at the local public health centre, she saw a troubling rise in skin ailments and cancer cases among her community, many belonging to indigenous tribal populations. Concerned about the potential link to the heavy reliance on chemical inputs in local farms, she decided to explore alternatives to cultivate her family's land.

When the Organic Cotton Accelerator and its Implementing Partner, Prati-bha Syntex, introduced organic farming practices to her village, Tarsila embraced the opportunity. What began as a personal decision to switch to organic farming has grown into a mission to empower her community—especially

women—to take charge of their land and their families' futures.

Across India, women are the backbone of agriculture. A 2024 study suggests agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for 80 percent of all economically active women in the country, yet they remain systematically underrepresented in land ownership, training programmes, and decision-making. Despite their integral role in farming operations, from sowing seeds to harvesting crops, women are frequently denied access to the resources, education, and opportunities they need to succeed. Organic Cotton Accelerator, a multistakeholder organisation fully dedicated to organic cotton working with over 110,000 farmers in India, Pakistan and Türkiye, is working to shift this dynamic.



The barriers women farmers face

India is the world's largest producer of organic cotton, and home to the vast majority of smallholder organic cotton farmers. Yet women farmers remain locked out of leadership and economic opportunity. The gender gap in agriculture, including organic cotton, is fueled by three systemic barriers: limited land rights, low financial literacy, and exclusion from training programmes. These programmes often prioritise male landowners, who typically hold the organic certification. As a result, women's decision-making power is curtailed, leaving them dependent on other family members to access quality inputs, credit, and fair markets.

This exclusion has deep consequences. Women farmers, despite their expertise and labour, are often sidelined from leadership roles, knowledge-sharing platforms, and income-generating opportunities. Bridging this gender gap is not just a matter of equity; it's essential for strengthening India's organic cotton sector and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for farming communities.

Toward an inclusive organic cotton sector

At OCA, we believe organic cotton is the catalyst for a truly sustainable textile sector. We envision a future where, every time a farmer

switches to organic cotton, there is a ripple effect of positivity. Farmers earn more and have access to better working conditions and secure livelihoods. Their land and soils are regenerated, biodiversity thrives, and together we contribute to combating climate change. We call this the Organic Cotton Effect. As an accelerator, we want to get to this future, faster.

One of the pathways to this future is empowering farmers through capacity building. Gender inclusion is central to these efforts. But gender is only one axis of inequity. Women farmers in India who belong to marginalised communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, often face compounded barriers rooted in caste, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. For these women, access to resources, education, and economic opportunities remains even more elusive. OCA's approach recognises these intersecting forms of disadvantage and addresses them by delivering a programme that empowers marginalised farmers and advocating for frameworks that promote equitable opportunities across the organic cotton supply chain.

Building pathways for women farmers

Since 2022, OCA has strengthened its cascading capacity-building model by rolling out the Organic Cotton Training Curriculum across all its farmer communities in India. OCA's training resources cover agronomic practices, cultivar performance, procurement, and, since 2024, decent work—including gender empowerment—to improve local practices and farmer livelihoods.

On the ground, OCA collaborates with a network of Implementing Partners who are advancing gender-inclusive initiatives and enabling environments for women by facilitating access to training, leadership roles, and income-generating opportunities through



allied activities like animal husbandry, horticulture or input preparation.

Training workshops, led by OCA's Implementing Partners, ensure field staff members gain seasonal knowledge through on-site demonstrations, which they then pass on to farmers. This approach combines top-down knowledge sharing with on-the-ground insights, as OCA's team regularly visits farms to gather case studies.

Women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) are central to this approach. Many FPOs now include women on their boards of directors, giving them a voice in decision-making processes that affect their farms and futures. Demonstration plots managed by women farmers help foster peer-to-peer learning and community leadership, enabling women to share knowledge and build supportive networks.

Meanwhile, bio-input centers and plant nurseries run by women provide access to organic inputs, such as compost, growth boosters and pest-repellants, serving as hubs of innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainable agriculture. These initiatives are embedded within OCA's broader Decent Work strategy, ensuring that gender equity is prioritised

across all areas of its Farm Programme.

The impact is tangible. In the 2023-2024 season, 38% of the farmers participating in OCA's Farm Programme were women, and 90% of them received specialised training in organic best practices. These numbers reflect more than statistics, they illustrate the real-life impact of OCA's capacity building efforts.

Tarsila's legacy: leading change beyond the fields

With OCA's support, Tarsila has gained access to non-genetically modified seeds, technical knowledge, and premium payments on top of the market price for her cotton. But her influence extends far beyond her own fields. She has become a role model for neighbouring farmers, some traveling from distant villages to seek her advice on organic cultivation techniques.

"Organic cotton cultivation has made us self-reliant and strengthened our connection to farming," Tarsila says, noting how switching to organic practices has reduced her input costs and improved her family's health and nutrition.

When women farmers gain control over their resources and incomes, they are able to pay for their children's education, improve their homes, and purchase assets like jewelry, which in rural India often doubles as financial security. For many, managing their own bank accounts is a first step toward financial independence.

"A long journey, but we are moving"

"Supporting women farmers in their journey of organic cotton farming is about empowering them to make economic decisions at the farm level, participate equally in planning of resources and to be able to access fair prices. Under OCA's Farm Programme, we invest in cadres of women lead farmers who drive their communities towards a more sustainable and equitable future," says Shankhamala Sen, OCA's Programme Implementation Manager in India. "We acknowledge that, while progress is being made, the work is far from over. It's a long process that requires systemic effort. But the impact we are see-

ing today is already laying the foundation for lasting change."

The road ahead requires collaboration

To drive the work on the ground, OCA is continuously growing its collaboration with likeminded organisations. Success depends on the support and collaboration of all value chain actors, including brands, suppliers, institutional and philanthropic donors, civil society organisations, and farm groups. OCA invites partners to join this transformative journey and accelerate the organic cotton effect, ensuring that every thread of cotton carries a story of dignity, farmer prosperity, and positive change for all farmers, including women.

For organic cotton and agriculture to thrive, women must be involved and rewarded. When women farmers succeed, their children, families, and communities gain access to better opportunities and improved livelihoods.

When women farmers rise, we all rise.





Women in Cotton (WiC): Shaping a more Inclusive Future in the Cotton Industry



WOMEN IN COTTON (WIC)

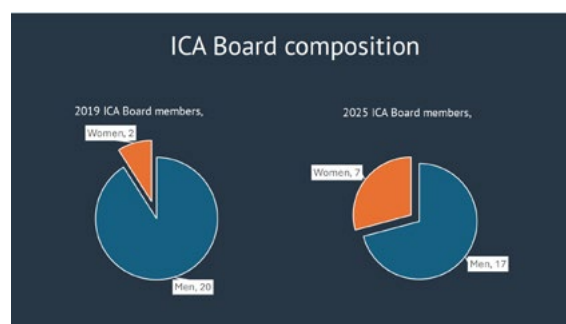
By Eimear McDonagh and Camille Cluzel on
behalf of Women in Cotton

Introduction

For over 178 years, the International Cotton Association (ICA) operated without a single woman sitting on its board. In 2019, that finally changed. Acknowledging the stark absence of female leadership, the ICA took a bold and necessary step by launching Women in Cotton (WiC): a transformative initiative dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion across the global cotton industry.

What began as a small effort to amplify women's voices has now grown into one of the most dynamic and influential movements within the ICA. Since the launch of WiC in 2019, the number of female ICA individual members has increased by 48%, female representation on ICA committees and working groups has increased by 356% and fe-

male representation on the ICA Board has increased by 250%. In 2023, history was made when Kim Hanna became the ICA's first female president, leading with strength, vision, and an unwavering commitment to change. These aren't just numbers. They represent the shifting tides of an industry once dominated by a single perspective. They signify progress, empowerment, and the unstoppable momentum of women stepping into leadership roles, shaping the future of cotton.



Our Mission: More than just Representation

At its heart, WiC is about transformation. It is about ensuring the voices of women, whether farmers, traders, researchers, spinners or industry executives, are heard, valued and accounted for in decision-making.

Key Objectives:

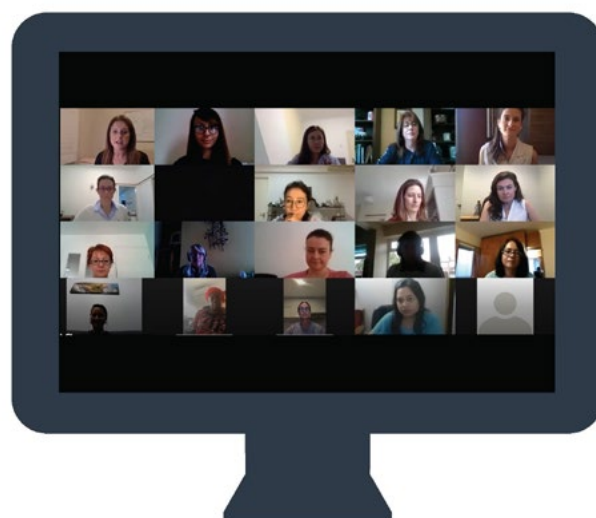
- **Promote Diversity and Inclusion:** The cornerstone of the WiC initiative is to foster a culture of diversity and inclusion within the cotton industry.
- **Empower Women:** By giving women, a stronger voice and creating opportunities for them to engage more deeply in the cotton community and to achieve leadership positions.
- **Educating and Inspiring:** Provide educational resources and platforms for women to share their experiences and knowledge.
- **Identify and measure the incidence and progress of Women in the Industry.**

Turning Vision into Action

Women in Cotton doesn't just talk about change, it makes it happen. Since its inception, the Women in Cotton initiative has undertaken many activities and launched several programs to support its mission, all of which are free to attend.

Chats for Change: Breaking Barriers through Conversation

One of the early educational endeavours of WiC was the establishment of the "Chats for Change" series. Faced with the Covid-19 lockdowns, these online professional pre-



sentations were launched in 2020 and this firmly established the online format. The series features discussions on topics relevant to supporting diversity in the industry and provides insights from experienced professionals, often university professors and executive coaches, and we also welcome volunteers to help us deliver these Chats for Change.

Examples of past Chats include:

- What does a Good Leader look like?
- Developing and leading Inclusive Cultures: An evidence-based approach
- Women in the Workplace: Past, Present and Future
- Mentorship & Sponsorship, Female Leaders & Emotional Intelligence.



Women in Action: Showcasing Women's Impact

In 2023, WiC expanded its educational efforts with the introduction of the "Women in Action" series. This series provides a plat-



form for women to discuss their roles within the cotton supply chain, offering a comprehensive view of the different functions and responsibilities they undertake. It highlights the diverse contributions of women and underscores the importance of their roles in the industry.

(Access to recordings for both Chats for Change and Women in Action series is available through the ICA.)

The Thing About Cotton (TTAC): Amplifying voices through Podcasting

The latest addition to WiC's initiatives, launched mid-2024, is the podcast "The Thing About Cotton" (TTAC). This podcast series features interviews with both women and men in the cotton industry. Through these conversations, the podcast



explores the anatomy of the cotton supply chain and highlights the achievements of women. TTAC serves as an excellent medium for sharing success stories and providing deeper insights into the workings of the industry. To-date we have many thousands of listens and many more exciting episodes are planned for broadcast soon.

(TTAC is available on Apple, Spotify, Google Player)

Opening Doors: The WiC Sponsorship programme

In 2024, WiC launched a funded sponsorship opportunity for a woman in the industry to attend the ICA's Complete Cotton training programme. The training provides some practical experience; an opportunity to share best practice; and unique networking opportunities for a woman who is at the early stages of her career in cotton. The scheme has received great interest and this year's scholarship recipient has just been confirmed as Ms Rabia Dada (Dadasons Private Limited, Pakistan).



Regional Groups : The Power of Local Action

WiC has also established regional groups in Europe, the United States, and Australasia. These groups work on local initiatives and collaborate with industry stakeholders to further the goals of WiC.

A shining example of local success is WiC



Brazil, which has secured significant industry funding, enabling professional speaker events and increased outreach. This model of regional collaboration is vital to WiC's long term vision: empowering women on a global scale.

Leadership: Breaking the Ultimate Barrier

Women in leadership positions remain the exception rather than the norm in the cotton industry. In 2023 the ICA made history when Kim Hanna was voted the first Female President of the ICA, a role that saw her travel extensively to cotton growing and consuming regions, supporting the ICA, and by extension WiC, throughout all parts of the supply chain and to previously unreached audiences. Her Presidency was noted in its extensive outreach work and increase in ICA and WiC membership. International engagement strengthened and Kim was instrumental in leading ICA's support for Make The Label



Count (MTLC) and its advocacy for cotton as a sustainable natural fibre. Kim excelled in leadership and critically embodied what WiC espouses - a woman in leadership. The first female presidency paved the way for more to follow with our co-author Eimear McDonagh being the current Second Vice President.

Beyond Inclusion: A Stronger, More Sustainable Industry

WiC members attend and speak at various conferences around the world, bringing awareness to the importance of diversity and inclusion by having women present on issues critical to industry. Through this networking they are acknowledged as providing valuable information on industry issues as well as promoting WiC on a global scale. Empowering women at all levels of the supply chain has direct sustainability benefits. When women farmers are educated on best practices, communities thrive. When women hold positions of influence, sustainability initiatives gain traction. And when women's contributions are recognized, cotton's market share strengthens. WiC is actively working with organizations like the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC) on studies such as the Gender Dynamic Survey, ensuring that women's roles are measured, understood, and valued.



Conclusion: A Call to Action

Women in Cotton have made significant strides in achieving impressive growth within the ICA membership and in promoting diversity and inclusion within the global cotton industry. By providing women with a platform, it not only gives them a voice, but it increases engagement and professional development for all genders. WiC is fostering a more inclusive and dynamic industry. Through its various activities and initiatives, WiC continues to empower women and highlight the critical role they play in the cotton supply chain.

Despite the progress, there is still much work to be done as Women remain largely underrepresented across the value chain. This is a collective movement. Everyone has a role to play.

How you can get involved:

- Support Women in Cotton through social media with likes, shares and contributions of relevant content. Join our Women in Cotton LinkedIn group and Facebook group – don't forget to use #WomeninCotton!
- Contact wic@ica-ltd.org with ideas or offers to get involved
- Access our library of previous events on the ICA's WiC YouTube Playlist >
- If there is a local WiC group, reach out to them and get involved. If you're unsure if your area has a local group, please check with wic@ica-ltd.org
- Help us to plan and deliver our Chats for Change events! Contact wic@ica-ltd.org with your ideas for future events and how you might contribute to delivering them
- Sign up to our eNewsletter to be the first to know about upcoming events
- You can also show your support by adding the Women in Cotton virtual 'button' to your email Signatures. If you are interested, simply email wic@ica-ltd.org and we will send you the imagery with a quick guide for installing.

The future of the Cotton Industry is one that is stronger, more innovative and inclusive. Women in Cotton is leading the way. Will you be a part of the Change?





What Works in Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Cotton Farming Communities



NINI MEHROTRA

Senior Manager Gender Equality, Better Cotton¹

Engaging with women in cotton farming roles Better Cotton and partners have reached out to 500,000 women in farming roles with programs promoting equal farming decision-making, climate resilience and livelihoods improvements. We continue to engage with more than 424,000 women workers with training inputs.

1.1 Better Cotton's commitment to gender equality:

'Women Empowerment' is one of the five Impact Targets that Better Cotton has committed to strengthen, in alignment with the organizational 2030 strategy. Better Cotton 2030 strategy sets direction for shifting the needle on women's empowerment and gender equality. The organization launched its gender strategy in 2019. It outlined three level of actions that have been witnessing momentum and deepen-

ing, viz farm, sustainable cotton community, within the organization.

Investing in women's empowerment for improving their position, deepening sustainable cotton farming practices and stabilizing cotton farming communities are inextricably linked. Our field-based experience shows and global research corroborates, that women's improved position at their household and community level is related with their improved food security, better health and health seeking behaviors, lowering of gender-based violence, and improved workloads.²

1.2 Unpacking issues of inequalities women experience:

Women labor intensively on cotton fields, but their labor is undervalued and often unrecognized. Although their labor on the farms is physically equally strenuous, but it gets considered as 'light work'.³ They are also lower paid with limited participation in more profitable, value-adding activities.⁴ Women workers experience inequality in wages, and inequity in working conditions especially related to health, rest and safety. Their efforts to exercise their bargaining power also puts them at social and physical risks given negative gender norms. They also struggle to find and leverage opportunities of growing their profits by undertaking higher paying roles or diverse work due to beliefs and limited examples of what women should and should not be doing. Women producers face gender based cultural norms that makes their access to financial services, extension services and timely information difficult. Many single women farmers struggle with inheritance issues even if they are the sole breadwinners for their families. FAO estimates that if women were to access the same productive resources as men, they would get a 20-30% boost in their yields.⁵ Women also experience a disproportionate labor burden as they work at farms and in domestic spaces without having much possibility of sharing the workloads.



Engaging with women in cotton farming roles

Better Cotton and partners have reached out to 500,000 women in farming roles with programs promoting equal farming decision-making, climate resilience and livelihoods improvements. We continue to engage with more than 424,000 women workers with training inputs.

1.3 Why can we not miss addressing issues of women's empowerment

Investing in women's empowerment is critical from a social gain, climate gain as well as economic gain perspective. Strengthening gender equality is a strategic area of investment. It's like pouring water into a river that nurtures many important tributaries like below:

(a) Unique gender based stressors get addressed: Women are left to manage the cascading impacts of financial instability at home. This compels women to shoulder the emotional and financial burden of balancing household needs, often at the cost of their own well-being. Empowering women with greater participation and decision-making in cotton production can steer the sector towards improved sustainable practices, reducing the financial stress on families and fostering economic resilience.

(b) Communities reap economic benefits of empowering women: There is comprehensive and long-standing evidence that demonstrates this correlation. More empowered the women are in a family or a household the better the household does on agricultural productivity, labor productivity, nutrition, educational well-being, soil fertility and financial stability.⁶

(c) Productivity gap closes: Women producers have a huge unmet need for support and resources. FAO study⁷ estimates that closing the gender gap in farm productivity and the wage gap in agricultural employment would increase global gross domestic product by nearly \$1 trillion and reduce the number of food-insecure people by 45 million.

(d) Sustainable farm practices gain from women's decision-making power – Sustainable farming production can improve when women farmers are more involved in decision-making.⁸ Ensuring dignity of their labour and equipping them with the modern knowledge and techniques will ensure their informed involvement in these and other farming activities.

(e) Food security is fortified: The over-reliance on chemical-intensive cotton production has led to decline in the possibil-

ity of ensuring food security at the household level.⁹ Empowering women with knowledge and resources to advocate for sustainable farming practices, including integrated crop systems, can restore food security and reduce the stress of food scarcity on women. Moreover, enabling women to participate in decisions about agricultural practices ensures that household needs, including food security, are prioritized.

(f) Being future ready - The world is now a more complex place. Covid 19 has been a testimony to the world's changing and complex nature. Feminization of agriculture¹⁰ is nudging several women into active frontal farming roles that. Hence, not equipping women with the knowledge, exposure and support to become equal partners in sustainable cotton farming will leave out a huge challenge unaddressed.

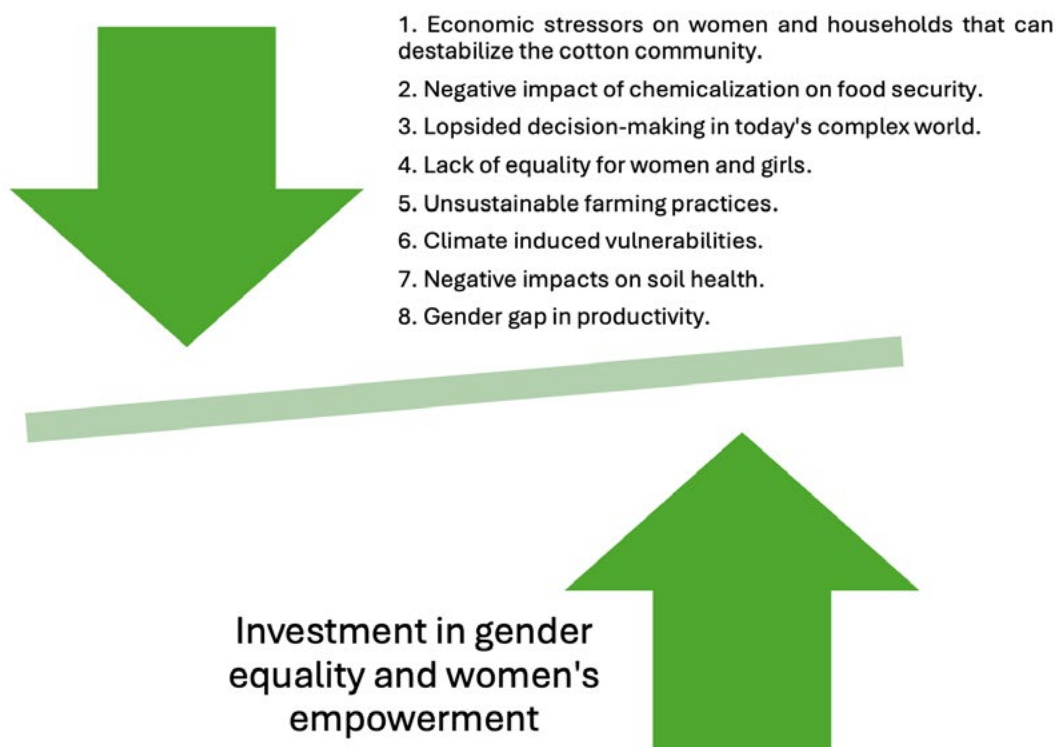


Figure 1. Why investment in women's empowerment and gender equality is a strategic area we can't miss.

2. Call to action: insights from the Better Cotton and partners' interventions

At Better Cotton, we've committed to the mission and we're leveraging our circle of influence. Being the world's largest sustainability initiative for cotton we have the opportunity of working with more than 2700 members in our network of farmers, ginners, spinners, suppliers, manufacturers, brand owners, retailers, civil society organizations, donors and governments.¹¹ Components of our multipronged strategy are detailed out below:

2.1 Keeping an explicit focus on gender equality in Better Cotton Standard System (BCSS) and due diligence:

Voluntary standard systems can play a pivotal role in promoting gender equality. As Better Cotton, we've build this awareness, possibility and commitment into Principles and Criteria (P&C), which lay out the global definition of Better Cotton through six guiding principles relating to the farm level production of cotton. In the latest revision of our Principles and Criteria (P&C), we have made Gender Equality a cross-cutting priority across all of our Principles. This approach aims to tackle systemic gender inequalities and promote women's rights by supporting their participation and inclusion. Since the P&C is core to our partnerships all across, we've created an environment of a joint mission having all the partners implement specific provisions for strengthening women's positions, participation and improve gender equality. These requirements have been introduced under the Management Principle which call for a Gender Lead or Gender

Committee to identify and effectively address local barriers to women's inclusion. In order to ensure that gender equality is mainstreamed across every farm, assessments on Producers' efforts to promote women's inclusion and tackle gender inequalities are now integrated into a range of different indicators across all of our Principles.¹²

Commitment to action on gender equality and aligning of indicators as a part of the due diligence process with partnering organizations is another aspect at the systemic level that allows for collaborations. It ensures alignment on set indicators which are related to gender mainstreaming and creating an enabling environment for enhanced gender equality.

2.2 Investing in farming communities and supporting program partners to mainstream gender sensitivity in programing and at organizational level:

The Better Cotton Growth and Innovation Fund (GIF) is Better Cotton's internal fund and works with civil society, industry and government partners. It supports Better Cotton's vision and mission with a field-level grant-making program and assist driving impact to the field. Investments are aligned to identified areas for impact. This has meant having more action on the ground relating to impact indicators – women empowerment being one of them.¹³ The GIF also engages knowledge partners to collaborate with country teams and program partners on areas related to women's empowerment and gender equality. This enables program partners who have largely been agronomy focused to strengthen their programing related to gender equality.

Committing to longer term women focused projects to bring change, cultivating successful model

Shifting the needle on gender equality and women's empowerment needs commitment, planning and close collaboration. Creating field-based models to learn from is immensely helpful and inspiring. Better Cotton is fueling this action in India with two of its program partners, Lupin Human Welfare Research Foundation (LHWRF) in Maharashtra and Aga Khan Rural Support Programme India (AKRSP - I) in Gujarat. LHWRF focus largely on economic development of women in cotton farming households and AKRSP-I addresses the systemic barriers to women's empowerment. At the GIF we've also led a process of developing a women farmer centred Empowerment Framework to support partners to assess progress and contribute to the larger area of empowerment measurement.

2.3 Providing a strategic framework for all field level action:

An overall gender approach ensures that the programmatic action on the community

Framework for field level action



and farm level meets women's immediate requirements and also addresses the root cause of gender inequality. We are increasingly aligning our and partners' work to strengthening women's agency, access and control of resources and improving gender equitable attitudes.

2.3a: Strengthening women's agency:

Agency refers to the women's ability to define goals and act on them, to make decisions that matter to them, and to participate in the economy and public life.¹⁴ Our partners engage with women to grow their knowledge, practice, and the confidence to take the risk, take decisions and experiment to learn.

Agency strengthening work: Insights from Lupin Foundation, India

Woman farmer implements newly acquired knowledge - improves her yield and environmental impact.

- **Inputs to the woman farmer:** confidence building, gender awareness training with a focus on decision making, strengthening risk taking abilities, new knowledge acquisition in a gender responsive way especially relating to inputs like seeds and pesticides, ease of information access in new areas, inputs in communication, support by woman field facilitator
- **Inputs to the family:** gender responsive and transformative family dialogue, consensus building at home, minimizing backlash.



- **Output:** confidence of the woman farmer to meet the challenge of trying new knowledge, successful communication and negotiation to access 1 acre of the total 4.5 acre of family land to farm per her newly acquired knowledge, 70 kgs of more lint cotton as compared to usual, 20 kgs of green gram and 10 kgs of cowpea for household consumption.
- **Outcome:** improved agency to influence collective decision, a more equal consultation to take best decisions for the farm, lowering of chemical fertilizer and using biopesticide.

2.3b Access and control of resources:

Women are unable to access and control resources due to gender based barriers which are critical to promote sustainable cotton production— be it village commons, opportunities of generating income and control of it, market access and linkage, credit, extension services, wholistic knowledge, technology, information, time, land. For instance there may be income generation programs that may leverage on women's commitment to their families to find extra time and effort to earn an increased income for their household, but may not help her in either combating domestic violence at home, or have any influence on re-investing that money. Better Cotton and partners undertake and are increasingly deepening work on control of resources by women.

Improving access and control of resources

Woman farmer's learning and practice of biofertilizer supports her to arrest her financial leakage and contribute to sustainable farming: insights from Research and Development Foundation, Pakistan.



- **Inputs to the woman farmer:** technical training, demonstration exposure, training manual, confidence building, supportive environment for learning and implementation.
- **Inputs to the family:** actively engaged in community mobilization and awareness-raising efforts to create support for her, acceptance and encouragement for her participation.
- **Output:** arrest her financial leakages and contribute to the environment, she is now an ambassador of ecofriendly pest management.
- **Outcome:** Conviction of inexpensive ecofriendly measure to reduce pest control, newfound confidence of achievement, positive impact to the environment.

2.3c Strengthening gender equitable attitudes:

A larger engagement with multiple stakeholders is critical to promote gender equitable attitudes. Only such attitudes create conditions for men and women to collaborate together, assess the real challenge and create most suitable solutions. If these attitudes are not strengthened, best decisions cannot be taken. For women to be able to exercise

agency, access and control resources it's critical that gender awareness is brought to all – women and men at individual, community and institutional levels.

Improving gender equitable attitudes and shifting the needle on gender norms

Men and women come together to collaborate for a shared future, Insights from Ophavela, Mozambique

- **Inputs to the woman farmer:** discussion sessions on gender, access to financial services through savings groups, exposure to financial education, access to modern agricultural inputs and techniques, creating opportunities for women to participate in leadership positions.
- **Inputs to the family:** family-based dialogues on gender roles, fostering environment of working together through mixed village level savings associations (VLSAs).
- **Output:** women and men collaborating in running their mixed savings groups, women leading task distribution, increased appetite for women's public roles and leadership, women displaying



enhanced aspiration to contribute to sustainability, women participating in non-traditional roles like fencing.

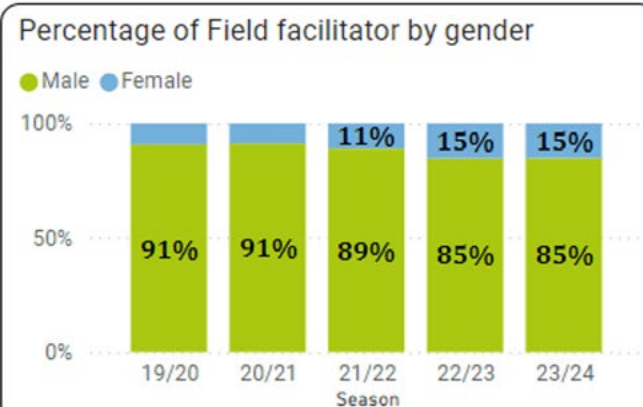
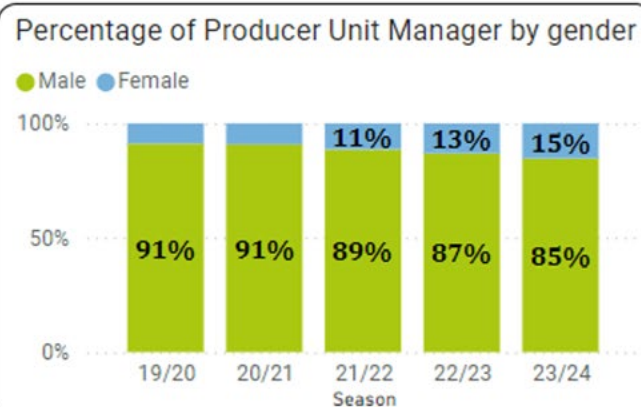
- **Outcome:** relaxation of gender norms especially in relation to what women should and shouldn't do, improved collaboration between men and women.

2.4 Building a cadre of women in field roles:

Better Cotton is actively working in close collaboration with its partners to achieve one of its sub-targets of ensuring that at least 25% of field staff are women with the power

Better Cotton's partners have been growing the representation of women in field roles consistently: S

Source: Better Cotton MEL information pack



to influence sustainable cotton production. Women in community facing roles, who demonstrate leadership in their work, have a high potential to progress gender equality and women's empowerment in their communities. Better Cotton believes that women field staff are critical to bringing P&C from theory to practice and best placed to amplify the voices of women in cotton and to bring equitable access to Better Cotton trainings and resources. This target allows us to focus our efforts and make steady gains.

Identifying proven strategies for building and incubating grassroots women into organizational leadership roles: a qualitative study

With support from ISEAL, we are in the final stages of a qualitative research that aims to identify proven strategies for recruiting and retaining women in field roles and support and development. The purpose of this study is to share best practices and learnings with donors, sustainability standards and civil society organizations to design and support processes that enhance gender equality and women's empowerment.

Researches team in a focused group discussion



3. Future goals

- **Continue to focus on strengthening gender mainstreaming in programing and powering P&C implementation on the ground:** We're committed to con-

tinuous improvement and supporting partners to strengthen the gender mainstreaming goals. This will be undertaken as learning journeys for partners where inputs and mentoring conversations will have a continuity all through the year. The coming year is also going to focus on strengthening the gender committee members to undertake gender-based analysis at the community with relevant tools and training to identify and meet immediate and strategic needs of women in farming roles.

- **Focus on building strategic partnerships:** Near future will also focus on building gender responsive climate resilience and collectivization. Better Cotton is collaborating with impact investment firm FS finance to develop a gender responsive financial solution for removing traditional financial barriers and supporting women small holders to strengthen their climate resilience. Better Cotton's Women in Cotton Accelerator (WICA) - an internal platforms is also dedicated to build innovation on the ground while targeting to expand the investments in the area.
- **Focus on strengthening our measurement frameworks:** Better Cotton employs diverse research methods, collaborating with independent organizations and researchers to assess field-level impacts comprehensively. As we focus to improve women's agencies, their access and control of resources we will also be re-engaging with our learning frameworks. This will also be an opportunity to contribute to the measurement discourse of women's agency and decision making in cotton farming context.
- **Liaison to advocate for gender equality:** We will continue to be a part of na-

tional and global forums putting the issue of gender equality on the table. We will continue network and liaison for expanding and deepening gender equality targets and ambition; to shift the needle to women's agency, access and control of incomes supported by gender equitable attitudes at practice and policy levels – going beyond only participation of women.

- **Focus on creating opportunity to celebrate:** We will continue to focus on creating opportunities to bring multi stakeholders together and celebrate the great work that our partners undertake at the farm level and to inspire our multiple stakeholders to commit to gender equality!

Endnotes

- 1 Opinions and interpretations expressed here belong to the author and do not necessarily represent those of Better Cotton or its stakeholders
- 2 Rapid evidence assessment on women's empowerment interventions within the food system: a meta-analysis | Agriculture & Food Security | Full Text, Assessing the effectiveness of food security and nutrition interventions on gender transformative outcomes | 3ie
- 3 Situation assessment of Better Cotton farms
- 4 (African Development Bank, 2015; Cotton Connect, 2016; the Sustainable Trade Initiative [IDH], 2019)
- 5 FAO Gender Policy – Annotated Outline
- 6 Economic Benefits of Empowering Women in Agriculture: Assumptions and Evidence – Journal of development studies
- 7 The Status of women in agrifood systems – quoted here : Women's equality in agrifood systems could boost the global economy by \$1 trillion, reduce food insecurity by 45 million: new FAO report
- 8 Women decision-makers can improve conservation and agriculture, study shows
- 9 Traditional practices such as growing companion food crops alongside cotton have been overshadowed. These companion crops historically contributed significantly to household food security, offering diverse and nutritious diets. However, the pervasive use of agrochemicals has also precluded the possibility of cultivating food crops within or around cotton fields due to contamination risks and land-use conflicts.





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