

PLANTING THE SEED: A JOURNEY TO GENDER EQUALITY IN THE COTTON INDUSTRY

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN THE COTTON GROWING COMMUNITIES OF INDIA



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an insight into the gender issues faced by the cotton industry and provides a compelling argument for expanding gender equality programmes within farming communities in India and beyond.

It offers businesses that rely on cotton a roadmap to improve the resilience of their supply chain by empowering the women who provide the foundation for the industry. Tackling gender inequality in cotton farming communities can help brands and retailers meet increasing consumer demand for sustainable cotton.

- **Section 1** looks at the current risks for the cotton market and highlights the cultural issues in rural communities and why there is now a focus on women in farming, with a focus on Gujarat, India. It introduces the economic reasons for engaging agricultural women on the journey to gender equality to positively benefit them, the community and ultimately brands and retailers.
- **Section 2** addresses the objectives and shares initial successes of CottonConnect's gender programmes, including a case study from one major retailer, Primark, that has made significant accomplishments through early engagement. It highlights the importance of developing gender-related programmes and the potential for scalability.
- **Section 3** highlights the awareness and demands of consumers and calls on businesses, NGOs and governments to collaborate. It provides a roadmap for gender equality to guarantee a healthy, sustainable future for the cotton industry and all its stakeholders.

By collaborating on developing better cotton supply chains and by joining forces in addressing gender equality in India's rural communities; brands and retailers can help ensure a more resilient, transparent and sustainable cotton market of the future.

WHY GENDER IS IMPORTANT IN THE COTTON INDUSTRY

Cotton is the most widely-used natural fibre in the world.ⁱ Its production is crucial not only to the cotton industry, but also to the industries in which it is used- most prominently, global fashion, where it remains the most popular fibre for clothing. Yet, many forms of cotton production are inefficient or unsustainable.

Farming is highly dependent on smallholders, but while its production supports 250 million people worldwide,ⁱⁱ cotton farmers do not always have access to the best practice knowledge or market connections that they need to thrive. Similarly, water and chemical pesticide use in cotton is often high, creating long-term challenges in an increasingly resource insecure world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Since 2009, CottonConnect has worked with brands and retailers to be commercially successful and environmentally and socially responsible in their business practices, by transforming the way they source cotton. Partnerships with companies and foundations like C&A, C&A Foundation, Burberry, John Lewis, Primark and Kering (Stella McCartney/ Alexander McQueen/ Saint Laurent) have demonstrated that a market-driven approach to creating ethical, sustainable and profitable cotton supply chains is possible. However, too often efforts to revitalise cotton supply chains have neglected one key stakeholder group: women.

Women are a crucial but frequently ignored stakeholder in global cotton production. In many growing communities, women play key roles in planting and harvesting that determine the quantity, quality, and sustainability of cotton farming. However, because their contributions go unacknowledged, they do not receive the same training or support as men. CottonConnect's research found that without specific outreach efforts just 4% of women join any form of training programme that can assist them in their roles as farmers and champions within their communities. In addition, low levels of knowledge in literacy, health, and rights reduce productivity and undermine family well-being.

i Howell, S. (2015). "How much of the world's clothing is made from cotton?" Available at: <http://www.livestrong.com/article/1001371-much-worlds-clothing-made-cotton/>

ii World Wildlife Fund (n.d.). "Cotton". Available at: <http://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/cotton>

iii World Wildlife Fund (n.d.). "Cotton: A water wasting crop". Available at: <http://www.worldwildlife.org/industries/cotton>



Yet, the potential of women’s influence in cotton farming communities is huge. Initial results from CottonConnect’s work show remarkable success, including:



Boosted profits by
41%



Increased yields by
16%



Cut water use by
16%



Reduced pesticide use by
43%

Exponential increases in handwashing, safe menstrual care, and healthy diets.

COTTONCONNECT AND THE “WOMEN IN COTTON” PROGRAMME

CottonConnect’s “Women in Cotton” programme has identified ways to improve farmer well-being and livelihoods and to drive sustainable and efficient cotton production. The programme builds knowledge, strengthens livelihoods, and connects markets. Together,

these programs provide the background in literacy, numeracy, rights and health to enable women to take advantage of increased livelihood opportunities, both within cotton and through supplemental income running their own enterprises. By building demand for sustainable cotton and strong supply chains, CottonConnect ensures that women and their families have access to a strong market.

COTTONCONNECT’S “WOMEN IN COTTON” PROGRAMME

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



HEALTH AND EDUCATION

STRENGTHENING LIVELIHOODS



AGRONOMIC SKILLS

CONNECTING MARKETS



SUPPLY CHAIN LINKAGES



RIGHTS TRAINING



BUSINESS MANAGEMENT



SOURCING SUSTAINABLE COTTON

TALES FROM THE FIELD: FARMER TRAINING – KHAILASHBEN MUKHER THAKOR

Khailashben Mukher Thakor was married and became a mother at 18 years old, moving to live with her husband's family in the village of Ranmalpur, Gujarat, India. They have ten acres of land in which they grow cotton.

There was an enrolment drive in her village for a programme run by NGO Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), CottonConnect and retailer Primark, and she decided to join. Three years on she says the programme has dramatically changed her life.

Khailashben has learnt better pre-sowing methods, furrow irrigation, soil testing, the importance of safety gear and how to ensure migrant labourers who work in her family's fields are kept safe. She better understands the importance of education, not just for her own child but also for the migrant labourers who she ensures send their children to school. In total, there are now 15 migrant labour children going to school in her village.

The family used to spend Rs. 15,000 (£150) on pesticides, but now they are making their own natural remedies and their expenditure has greatly reduced. Her family's cotton yield has increased from 300 kgs to 600 kgs for every quarter acre. She also now plants non-GMO cotton seeds around the fringes of her farm, which is considered best practice by the world's leading agriculturalists.

“ I used to be very shy. I had no confidence talking to more than two or three people, let alone putting my views across. Through this programme, I am more outspoken as I realised I could help my family. With all the money we have saved from what I learnt, we have built a new house, bought a tractor, can pay for my child's studies and we can afford to contribute to family marriages. My mother-in-law has gained new-found respect for me and given me full rights of the house. The entire family are proud of me – and I am proud of me too! ”





1.0 WOMEN AND SUSTAINABLE COTTON MARKETS

The wellbeing of communities in which cotton is grown and manufactured is at the heart of a quality supply. This section outlines the social and business case for investing in women in cotton communities and details the context of women in the whole cotton industry of India.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN IN COTTON



GENDER AND THE COTTON MARKET

Cotton is a major global commodity and is the leading natural fibre of choice within the international clothing industry. It is also a crop that relies on smallholder farmers, rather than mass-scale farm production.

The quality of cotton is dependent on how it's planted, grown and harvested. Improper harvesting or incorrect post-harvesting storage can decrease the value of the cotton, making it unusable or unsuitable for dyeing. The availability and desirability of each grade is a major pricing factor on the demand side. Women are heavily involved in the labour intensive work of sowing, weeding and harvesting, and when men migrate away for other work, they carry on farming while also taking care of a household and providing for their family.

As a result, there is a powerful business case for engaging women in proper practices that would improve the quality of cotton delivered to gins. For brands and retailers in particular, there is also a strong business case for sourcing cotton that complies with ethical and sustainable sourced cotton standards and that supports entry into the increasing market for responsibly-sourced goods.

As the world's second largest producer^{iv}, India plays a crucial role in safeguarding the international cotton industry, where there are around four million cotton farmers and an estimated 45 million people employed in cotton production and processing. Women account for 70% of the cotton planting, and 90% of the hand-picking, according to the ITC^v. Therefore, the need to address the role of women when discussing the risks of the cotton market becomes more important.

"Apart from focusing on technology and the enabling environment for investment and market integration, policies should also focus on health and education. Promoting health, education and skills in rural areas is crucial in facilitating structural transformation. Better nutrition, health and higher levels of education increase labour productivity but also enhance non-farm employment opportunities for smallholders."

George Rapsomanikis, Senior Economist, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015^{vi}

^{iv} Statista, 2015 data

^v Women in Cotton: Results of a Global Survey Available at: http://www.intracene.org/uploadedFiles/intracene.org/Content/Exporters/Sectors/Food_and_agri_business/Cotton/AssetPDF/Women%20in%20cotton%20-%209%2011%20FINAL.pdf

^{vi} The economic lives of smallholder farmers, George Rapsomanikis, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Rome, 2015 <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5251e.pdf>

“It has been proven time and again that gender equality is not simply a moral issue. When women are empowered to take care of themselves, make decisions, take charge of land and their finances, not only does their household income grow, the entire community economy benefits. It would be disadvantageous to all stakeholders if we failed to find a gateway for women to be included in these vital conversations.”

Alison Ward, CEO, CottonConnect

Day-to-day cotton farming and cultivation relies on manual labour. Yet the workforce in emerging nations can often be unstable due to ill health because knowledge of good nutrition, proper health interventions, and access to healthcare is often a challenge. This is particularly true for women, who are likely to eat last, and face increased health risks related to personal issues, such as unsafe menstruation care or increased exposure to pesticides.

Coupled with this, even women farmers may not be equipped to maximize cotton yields or farm income. This is due to comparatively low levels of education, informal and unacknowledged roles within family cotton production, reduced control over cotton income, and low access to markets.

With a growing global population, demand for cotton is on the increase. Now is the time to look at the long-term sustainability to support the growth of the industry.

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

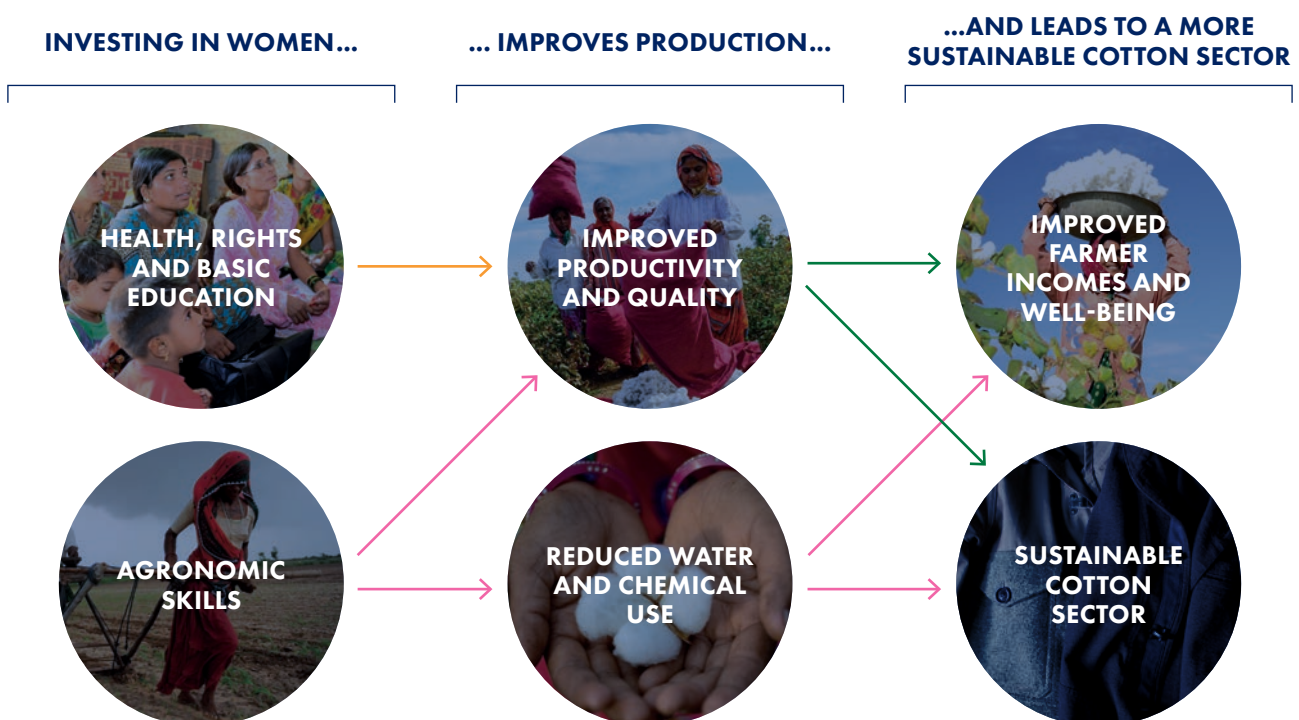
If women do not see themselves as cultivators or farmers, then they do not join key conversations that focus on safe, sustainable and profitable agriculture.

Interventions are often orientated towards men, so women do not gain the knowledge and skills to ensure that they and their families remain healthy and resilient.

Women are losing out on gaining new, useful knowledge – from valuable farming best practice to the general essentials of social welfare.

Yet we cannot simply invite women to join the conversation, because they won't attend. The role of women in farming is a journey that needs to be well-planned and executed through culturally appropriate gender equality programmes.

WOMEN CAN CHANGE THE COTTON SECTOR



WOMEN IN INDIA

Women farmers in India are underrepresented. The United Nations has placed gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls as one of its Sustainable Development Goals. India's government, under Prime Minister Modi, renewed this commitment to advancing gender equality. Yet, India currently ranks at 130 out of 188 countries in the UN's Gender Inequality Index and the UN Resident Coordinator of India stated in 2014 that gender equality is one of the most pressing development challenges facing India.^{vii}

"With higher incomes women are more likely than men to support household welfare and children's education." – Professor Barrientos, Capturing the Gains, Feb 2013

Families benefit if gender inequality is addressed. A 1988 survey^{viii} indicated that female workers tend to spend just 5% on themselves, compared to men who spend 50 – 55%. When women hold the purse strings, it is more likely that they will spend on investment into children's education and the families' overall health.

INDIA'S FEMALE COTTON PRODUCERS

Women undertake the majority of roles in India's cotton production that drive cotton output and quality. Yet, they have fewer opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

In India, the world's second largest producer of cotton, women play a crucial role in cotton cultivation, accounting for 70% of the cotton planting, and 90% of the hand-picking, according to the International Trade Centre^x. Yet the average income for women in rural India is just 78% of men's income, despite their role and contribution.^x

"I recently spent the afternoon talking to a group of women labourers who are part of our Women in Cotton Programme. These women are often employed to weed and pick cotton, but they told me that they earn only 40 rupees for a day's work – where as the men earn 80 rupees. The women didn't think this was fair"

Alison Ward, CEO, CottonConnect

Due to patriarchal traditions in India's rural communities, women are not only a minority of the smallholders; they are often excluded from the training that their male counterparts receive. Women have few rights and are often unpaid workers in the field. Men maintain full ownership of agricultural land, because the dominant culture is that land is inherited by sons. Even with recent changes in Indian law that favour females, it is rare for women to be landowners.

Men are considered the farmers, as they have a more front-facing role and are responsible for crop management and financial transactions, such as taking the crop to market and purchasing seeds from local vendors. Yet, it is actually women who are accountable for the majority of the day-to-day work, such as planting, weeding, pesticide preparation, watering and crop picking.^{xi} Increasing the productivity, quality and sustainability of the cotton sector means working with women.

In rural India, women always put their families first. Diet is important and iron deficiency is prevalent, and is often a precursor to severe malnutrition. The impact of poor health is felt by the family and the farm.

Women are still brought into marriage with an illegal yet prevalent dowry system and are told that female children are not important.^{xii} This limits education rights and aspirations, and augments the illegal practice of female infanticide, creating a gender imbalance within farming communities.

vii India committed to gender equality: Government tells UN, Economic Times, 2015

Available at: http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-03-12/news/60047988_1_gender-equality-gender-budgeting-gender-perspective

viii http://www.sewa.org/images/archive/pdf/moving_towards_people_centered.pdf

ix Women in Cotton: Results of a Global Survey, Technical Paper 2011

Available at: [http://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Exporters/Sectors/Food_and_agri_business/Cotton/AssetPDF/Women in cotton - 9 11 11 FINAL.pdf](http://www.intracen.org/uploadedFiles/intracenorg/Content/Exporters/Sectors/Food_and_agri_business/Cotton/AssetPDF/Women%20in%20cotton%20-%209%2011%20FINAL.pdf)

x India Census, 2011. Available at: http://mospi.nic.in/mospi_new/upload/man_and_women/women_men_in_india_2014.htm

xi Women in Cotton: Results of a Global Survey, Technical Paper 2011

xii The guardian, February 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/feb/03/india-anti-dowry-films-i-paid-the-price-i-own-your-son-brides-fight-back>



Anecdotal evidence suggests that most farming communities consider a woman's contribution to be nothing more than occasional and insignificant – and women themselves begin to believe this.

“As a woman you always live life for others, but today you are here for yourself!”

Ushabhen, Community Social Worker, speaking at CottonConnect's Women's Convention, Gujarat, 2016

This false perception of women has profound social and economic implications. Women are removed from decision-making in important financial, household and family welfare matters.

“Women work in agriculture as farmers on their own account, as unpaid workers on family farms and as paid or unpaid labourers on other farms and agricultural enterprises.”

Roles of women in agriculture, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2011)

This needs to be addressed to guarantee the resilience of the cotton market in the future.

TALES FROM THE FIELD: EDUCATION – MADHU

Madhu has lived all her life in Metrana Village in Gujarat, a state on the west coast of India. She lives in a joint family with her husband, in-laws, twin daughters (aged ten) and two sons (aged eight and four years). Her husband works as a state transport bus conductor. When her family was first approached by CottonConnect, they were told that the role of women is important.

“My whole life I had believed that it is the duty of a woman to serve her family and husband first. Now I know this is not correct. The only information I ever received was from within the four walls of my home. From the time I got married, I was never allowed to come out of the house. Since joining the CottonConnect REEL Rights & Life Skills Education Programme my family have noticed a big change in me. I am interacting with other women for the first time and becoming much more aware of many things, such as free access to health care. They see that I can think for myself. I have realised that when you take care of yourself, your whole family benefits.”

Madhu has since learnt about anaemia deficiency and the importance of good health and nutrition. She has also changed her perspective on the rights of her children. Many children in the village were being sent for casual labour in nearby fields and local food joints, but she has now become an advocate for discouraging this. She learned at the CottonConnect REEL Rights & Life Skills Education Programme that children need their childhood, as it is the time for them to learn.

“I have high dreams for my children now, especially my daughter who is very bright. We all hope she will become an IPS (police) officer!”



2. PLANTING THE SEED: COTTONCONNECT’S WOMEN EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES

CottonConnect is an enterprise with a social mission to transform the cotton industry for good by working in partnership with leading brands and retailers to develop a transparent and sustainable cotton supply chain.

ABOUT COTTONCONNECT

Transforming the world’s cotton for good.

- We increase transparency by connecting brands and retailers with their supply chains, we empower farmers to be more resilient and productive, and we enhance livelihoods of smallholder farmers and their communities.
- We develop a more robust and resilient supply chain to deliver positive outcomes – better management of risk, greater security of supply, increased productivity, stronger livelihoods, and positive impact on relationships and reputation.
- We ensure that we deliver business, environmental and social benefits, both to the retailers and brands and to the smallholder farmers and their communities.
- We are experts in our field, we work collaboratively in partnership with brands and retailers to map their supply chain, connect them to smallholder farmers, and deliver programmes customised to meet their needs.

In the last four years, CottonConnect has worked with 135,000 farmers globally and increased the land under sustainable cultivation by almost 500,000 acres. Deep connections across the value chain help CottonConnect establish connections between women farmers on the ground and cotton gins, processors, brands and retailers.

COTTONCONNECT’S “WOMEN IN COTTON” PROGRAMME IS:

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



HEALTH AND EDUCATION:

Training in health, hygiene, nutrition and occupational hazards improves family wellbeing and increases productivity.



RIGHTS TRAINING:

Training on labour, child and women’s rights improves women’s ability to negotiate for themselves and their families.

STRENGTHENING LIVELIHOODS



AGRONOMIC SKILLS:

Training in technical skills and sustainable production increased output, quality and environmental impact.



BUSINESS MANAGEMENT:

Business training and enterprise development provides year round income, decreasing migration from cotton.

CONNECTING MARKETS



SUPPLY CHAIN LINKAGES:

Connecting actors along the cotton value chain brings sustainable cotton to market.



DEMAND FOR SUSTAINABLE COTTON:

Driving increased demand for sustainability and ethically produced cotton.



Improving the quality, quantity and sustainability of cotton production.

A PIONEERING APPROACH TO GENDER: PRIMARK

CottonConnect assisted Primark in establishing its Sustainable Cotton Programme in Gujarat, India, which for the first time focused on supporting female farmers, helping to introduce sustainable farming methods, improve cotton yields, and increase incomes.

Primark is one of Europe's largest clothing retailers, and like almost every other fashion retailer, cotton makes up a significant proportion of Primark's clothing range.

Over a three year period and in partnership with its local NGO partner, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the Primark Sustainable Cotton Programme trained over 1,251 female smallholders through classroom sessions, in-field training and learning groups.

Farmers were trained on the most appropriate farming techniques for their land, from seed selection, sowing, soil, water, pesticide and pest management, to picking, fibre quality, grading and storage of the harvested cotton. The training also covered health and safety, and working conditions.

The results far exceeded expectations, with smallholders gaining average profit improvements of 211%.

Over the three year pilot, average household incomes grew. This money went directly back into the community, improving family welfare and investment in the household.

"I invest any extra income I make into my children's education. One of my children is at the best school in the area, and another is first in her class. I'm very proud of them." Kanchanben, female smallholder participating in the project

Training was delivered to ensure improved farming and better cotton yields. At the same time, there were proven environmental benefits, including reduction of water, pesticides and chemical fertilisers.

The programme has made the women both agriculturally and socially active. Their voices are now heard and respected, and they are now part of the decision-making process with their families and communities, which demonstrates a real cultural shift.

As cotton farming tends to support five people in each household, the benefit of this programme alone is thought to have reached over 6,000 people in rural India.

"It is our belief that long-term partnerships hold the key to delivering sustained change. Through partnership we can bring together on-the-ground expertise with our scale to truly make a difference. Primark's Sustainable Cotton Programme started with the ambition to improve the lives of female smallholders in India by showing how sustainable farming methods are good for the environment and improve lifestyles. By empowering these women it has also helped to narrow the gender inequality gap in their communities." Paul Marchant, CEO, Primark

Due to the success of the pilot, this collaboration has been extended for a further six years, which is expected to reach an additional 10,000 female farmers.



“WOMEN IN COTTON” – INITIAL SUCCESSES

Women who are healthy, educated, trained in best practice farming techniques and have access to business skills development, can significantly improve the sustainability of the cotton industry, and safeguard farmers, brands and retailers against market volatility.

To address the gender imbalance in the cotton sector, CottonConnect decided to establish a series of initiatives targeted at women. These programmes address challenges women face at home and on the farm, and are divided into three mutually reinforcing initiatives: Responsible Environmental Enhanced Livelihoods (REEL), the Farmer Business School, and REEL Rights & Life Skills Education

Programme. Each can be rolled out individually or in conjunction, and is supported by CottonConnect’s ongoing initiatives to build transparent, connected, and sustainable supply chains. Their combined objectives are to:

- **Build knowledge on basic education and rights;**
- **Advance women’s technical skills related to cotton production and enterprise management; and**
- **Connect markets by increasing demand for sustainable cotton and improved supply chains.**

Descriptions of and early results from each initiative are outlined in the table below.

TALES FROM THE FIELD: HEALTH – NANDITA




Nandita lives in a joint family with her husband, her in-laws and her two daughters, aged 16 and 10, in the village of Dindrol, Gujarat, India. During the health module of CottonConnect’s REEL Rights & Life Skills Education Programme, Nandita learnt that she had not been taking care of herself properly. The principles of good health had never been explained to her before. Since joining, Nandita has changed the food habits of her entire family, to ensure they now have dal (lentils) in addition to roti (Indian bread) and sabzi (vegetables). Nandita is also now purchasing sanitary napkins from the local medical shop for her and her daughters, instead of using old rags.

Nandita has become a role model for the CottonConnect Women’s Empowerment programme, and is always sharing what she has learned with other women in her village.

“Not all women get the opportunity, so I am always telling them about the importance of good healthy food, better menstruation practices, and self-examination.”



WOMEN IN COTTON PROGRAMMES

Project Name and Focus	Description	Initial Results
<p>Responsible Environmental Enhanced Livelihoods (REEL)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on agronomic training 	<p>A three year farmer skills programme covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environment: Reduction of chemicals, water efficiency, improved soil health and biodiversity, intercropping, natural/ organic fertilisers and pesticides Socio-economic: Reducing input costs and increasing yields to improve profitability and livelihoods; alongside decent work practices, health and safety, education, child labour, and women's rights 	<p>Farmer training achieved significant results globally*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yield + 16% Water usage – 16% Chemical fertiliser is – 20% Chemical pesticide – 43 % Profit + 41% <p>* compared to control farmers</p>
<p>Farmer Business School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on business management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial: Focus on farmer finance, business management Building farmers' capacity in entrepreneurial and management skills Looking at new technologies and market opportunities with microfinance and credit 	<p>Results from project with Chinese cotton farmers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved awareness with 95% knowing the profitability of their farms (compared to 68% pre training) 80% want to keep track of their outgoings (compared to 10% farmers normally maintaining the habit) 87% say they would like to buy insurance for the cotton (compared to 13% actually buying in past)
<p>REEL Rights & Life Skills Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on rights and lifeskills education 	<p>A holistic intervention that reinforces women's livelihood opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health: Key information was provided to improve the wellbeing of women and their families on water, hygiene and sanitation, sexual and reproductive health; and occupational health and safety. This improves the wellbeing of workers' and their families, reduces illness and improves productivity Rights training: Women are provided with information on child, labour and women's rights, improving their ability to reduce child labour and improve working conditions and their own status in the community Enterprise development: business skills and micro-enterprise training to give women supplementary income during the cotton off-season 	<p>Results from a group of 500 women and 150 adolescent girls showed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 84% are using soap for hand washing, up from 9% 72% are aware of anaemia, up from 4% 47% are taking iron / folic acid 27% are using a sanitary napkin – up from 1%

“Providing a woman with life skills training is the necessary building block before she can become engaged in more complex business matters. When a woman takes care of herself, gains confidence and develops an appetite for sustainable business, everyone benefits. It really is that simple.”

Arvind Rewal, CottonConnect, Regional Director – South Asia

WHY WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT?

While training in agronomics and business management have a direct link to productivity, profitability and sustainability, the link between these outcomes and women’s rights and lifeskills training is less obvious. In fact, women’s ability to improve their lives off the farm directly helps them improve their livelihoods on the farm.

For instance, in the REEL Rights & Life Skills Education Programme, women were selected from low income households whose primary source of earnings is agriculture. Over half of the women (54%) had a household monthly income between Rs.1000 – Rs.5000 (or £10 – £50), which falls well-below the Indian government’s monthly living wage figure of Rs. 15,000 (£150)^{xiii}. According to the initial assessment survey of participants, most of the women were unaware of best practices in health. Only 8% of the women were using soap to wash their hands, 98% of them did not use sanitary protection during menstruation, and only 28% had adopted a family planning method.

The Women’s Empowerment programme functions in key incremental steps. It first gains woman’s trust and develops esteem and confidence, before delving into women’s empowerment, which CottonConnect believes has the greatest impact in ensuring a healthy, sustainable future for the cotton industry and its stakeholders.

Child rights – the importance of listening and giving respect and choices to children – is taught by local social workers who have a rapport and can show empathy to the women’s perspectives. Ensuring that all children go to school and have the right to a childhood, instead of being sent to the fields as free labour for the family or as an extra household earner is also addressed.

Since the start of the programme participants have been receptive to taking on more responsibility within their community. CottonConnect will continue to deliver training and empower female smallholders to increase and jointly manage household incomes. Collaboration with local community partners who understand the local language and the community dynamics is essential to success in creating long-lasting impact.

ENGAGING MEN

Advancing gender equality isn’t just about empowering women – it’s about engaging men. Prior to starting any gender-related programmes CottonConnect looks to the wider community and assesses the complexity of roles and relationships. Particularly in a context like rural India, it is important to seek the support of and engage male elders and family members.

“Engaging men is important because it helps women to get continued reassurance that the entire family is with them. The involvement of the whole family brings better results. This is the collaborative approach CottonConnect undertakes with all its gender-related programmes – and the impact is significant.”

Rudrani Oza, CottonConnect India Manager, Farm Innovations

For instance, in the “Empowerment through Rights and Education” initiative, CottonConnect involves respected male elders and members of the farming community to build community buy-in and assist in implementation. As a result, community elders are receptive to the idea of women having their own forum to gain life skills. Not only do they support the programme in principle, men rally women to attend by highlighting its importance for the community. In addition, men are kept updated about the programme to ensure continued support and are invited to training sessions too. If any men have specific concerns, it is addressed on an individual basis. This continuing inclusive approach contributes to success.

^{xiii} Times of India, 2015

TALES FROM THE FIELD: A MALE PERSPECTIVE – FUJLJBHAI

Fuljibhai and his wife Kahilashben live in Ranmalpur Village in Gujarat, with their two daughters and one son. His wife has been involved in the Primark Sustainable Cotton Programme for three years.

Fuljibhai's father was a diamond polisher but then when their income dropped the family took to farming. Fuljibhai utilises an alternative cropping approach, growing cotton, cumin, coriander, fennel and peanuts, as he knows it helps the soil, and also helps guarantees against a single seasonal income.

"Initially I was not that interested in my wife attending the programme, although I had no objections. My wife did not seem too keen either but then I noticed her becoming more enthusiastic with each session, and her confidence significantly increased. When she was coming from the training and sharing what she had learned, I would listen. I realised that what she had to say made a lot of sense.

As a farmer, I found that the information was technically clear and logical, so I was keen to try out her suggestions as I realized we could save money – which we have! We have purchased new agricultural equipment, and our children are getting a better education.

If any man has a doubt about CottonConnect's gender programmes, I would say don't have doubt! Women learn good things that guarantee a better yield. Your wife and the whole community will benefit!

The role of women in agriculture is important. Without women, you can't think of farming. She is the core. It starts from the moment when you wake up in the morning and she makes you a cup of chai. Then she accompanies you to the fields and works with you until dawn. She is equally important and has a most important role. When it comes to seed planting, which we do manually, women do this delicately with such detail – this is not a skill we men have, as we do not have the patience or accuracy! Women are very crucial for weeding as whilst we do the large bits with tractors, they have a good eye for picking the smaller weeds. They put down the fertilisers and are heavily involved in the picking."

"I used to take sole responsibility for the production and selling, but now we are both involved in this in a participatory approach. I am very proud of my wife. Without her, I would not be a very good farmer."



3. THE WAY FORWARD

“For social, economic and political empowerment of rural women in India, Development Managers need to move on from considering men as farmers, and women as farmer’s wives. They need to design programmes that recognize men and women as equal partners.”

Recommendations from Local Tribunal Sector India (Jan Sunwais)

KEY INSIGHTS

This report has focused on CottonConnect’s gender programme to empower women in cotton in India; however, the insights are relevant to cotton producing communities globally.

- Gender equality will mean secure cotton production and supply chains:** To improve cotton production in an increasingly resource-constrained world, companies that produce or depend on cotton need to understand the communities and people that grow it. As women have a critical role in cotton production, harvesting and processing, we need to provide women with technical training and access to markets which will positively impact and improve the quality, quantity and security of cotton production.
- Gender equality has social and environmental benefits:** At first glance, promoting women’s empowerment may not seem to be directly related to environmental sustainability; yet, CottonConnect’s work shows that environmental benefits are evident – e.g. water and pesticide use can be drastically reduced when training is provided to the people responsible for production – which, more often than not, relates to women.
- Gender equality positively impacts livelihoods and wellbeing:** While technical training is key to improving livelihoods for women in cotton and their status in society, there are many issues beyond the cotton fields that positively impact wellbeing. Improving women’s knowledge of health, rights and life skills supports the well-being of women and their families as well as improving their productivity and livelihoods which ultimately empowers women and improves their status and role in society.
- Gender equality will increase demand and build connected markets for women:** Women’s empowerment in cotton doesn’t end on the farm. Women need to be able to bring their cotton to market, and to have it valued by mills, gins, brands and retailers. This means building demand for sustainable cotton that includes gender equality as one of its key metrics.

CottonConnect demonstrates that simple interventions for women in cotton growing communities can make a significant difference to the social, environmental and economic status of women and drive positive impacts for the future of the cotton industry.

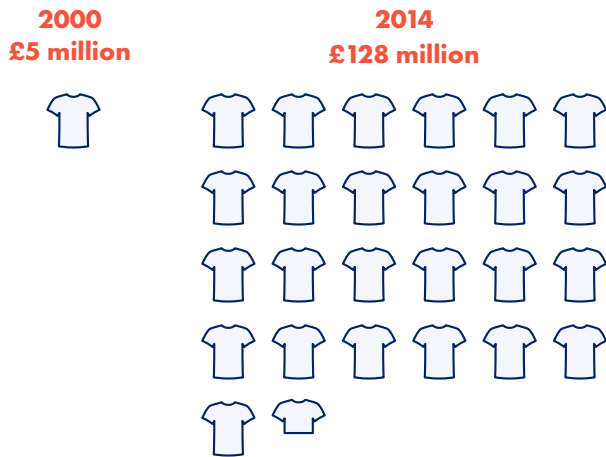
THE ROLE OF CONSUMERS

Today’s consumers want to know more about the people who produce the cotton they buy, so transparency is increasingly important for brand reputation.

“Try to buy brands that are doing good in the world.” Lily Cole, Supermodel

A Nielsen study of online consumers^{xiv} across 60 countries highlighted that 55% were willing to pay more for products and services provided by companies that are committed to positive social and environmental impact. We are also seeing retailers and fashion houses making commitments to source sustainable cotton; and the Better Cotton Initiative has a goal to reach 30% of the world’s cotton production by 2020.

According to Ethical Consumer reports, in 2000, the ethical clothing market was worth just £5 million. By 2014, the ethical clothing market was worth £128 million.



Women play a crucial role in creating the cotton for fashion that other women wear, and younger audiences are particularly vocal on the issue.

Customer relationships are at the heart of business success. Future looking brands and retailers understand that sustainability, gender equality and brand reputation are interlinked.

COTTON INDUSTRY WORKING TOGETHER TO RE-DEFINE SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS

There is a significant opportunity to tackle gender inequality and the vulnerability of smallholder women farmers who are at the heart of the cotton supply chain. Productivity outcomes can also be achieved through simple yet significant interventions.

It takes brand leadership to help drive gender equality and sustainable cotton production forward, whilst at the same time guarantee better long-term business prospects.

We can learn from brands that have already had proven success through their involvement with their supply chains, such as C&A Foundation, Primark, John Lewis and Kering.

“Transforming our industry so that it addresses our social and environmental challenges is a formidable task, but it is an achievable one.”

Francois-Henri Pinault, CEO, Kering

An example of CottonConnect’s approach to increase transparency and build brands is their work with C&A and John Lewis. CottonConnect worked with C&A to link sustainable fibre into the supply chain for their market-leading organic clothing range. Working with John Lewis, Cotton Connect trained 1,500 farmers on sustainable cotton to create Foundation Cotton. This Foundation Cotton was used to produce a bath mat with a two-fold outcome; both helping John Lewis become involved with cotton producers at farm level, and enabling them to run a PR campaign to outline their brand position on sustainability to customers.

No one brand can act alone to solve the issues of the global cotton industry – this can only be achieved through collaboration. Businesses, governments, NGOs and other international development agencies can join forces with organisations like CottonConnect to find solutions and support cotton’s future success.

Only by working collaboratively at all levels in the supply chain – can we make an impact. By helping to improve the lives of women, empowering them through better livelihoods, improved farming techniques, business and financial understanding, we can help to make the cotton industry more sustainable and continue to meet the growing demand for cotton globally.

The research, as outlined in this report, proves that women are integral to a sustainable cotton supply chain. Ultimately, this brings benefits to brands and retailers.

“Our goal is that we change the high street – and that we can buy great clothes and homewares at the right price; knowing that the men and women at the beginning of the supply chain have a thriving and sustainable future.”

Alison Ward, CEO, CottonConnect.

GET IN TOUCH – JOIN US ON THE JOURNEY TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN COTTON

For more information on CottonConnect please visit www.cottonconnect.org.



CottonConnect is a company with a social purpose to re-imagine the cotton supply chains and help textile producers and farmers enjoy better livelihoods.

CottonConnect • Tel: +44 (0) 203 865 7038 • www.cottonconnect.org
WeWork, New Kings Beam House, 22 Upper Ground, London SE1 9PD