



CASE FOR INVESTMENT

WOMEN IN COTTON ACCELERATOR



THE CASE FOR ACTION

BETTER COTTON LEADS GLOBAL COTTON SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS, WITH NEARLY 25% OF THE WORLD'S COTTON NOW PRODUCED UNDER OUR STANDARD BY 2.13 MILLION LICENSED FARMERS. OUR WOMEN IN COTTON ACCELERATOR TARGETS A BOLD GOAL: **EMPOWERING 500,000 WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS BY 2030.**

WHY?

BECAUSE WHEN WOMEN CONTROL FARM AND HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES, THEY BECOME CATALYSTS FOR SUSTAINABLE COTTON PRODUCTION THAT BENEFITS THEIR COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT.

There is an enormous opportunity to unlock the potential of women smallholder farmers - investing in women means supporting economic development at the core of the cotton value chain, elevating the cotton industry as a whole and paving the way towards sustainability and compliance with legislation.

THE OPPORTUNITIES

ACCELERATING SUSTAINABILITY WHILST INCREASING YIELDS 1

Given the persistent productivity challenges in cotton production such as India's low yields due to pesticides overuse, small landholder and climate stressors, the inclusion of women smallholders is critical for the sectors' future. Women already play key roles in the production of cotton yet remain excluded from resources and decision-making opportunities.

FAO's recent Status of Women in Agrifood Systems report (2023) [1] builds on the findings of the 2011 State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) report, which made a strong case for closing gender gaps in agriculture. The 2011 report [2] highlighted that **ensuring equal access to agricultural assets, inputs, and services could raise women's farm yields by 20–30% and boost total agricultural output in low-income countries by 2.5–4%**. By investing in equal access of resources, women are better equipped to address key productivity challenges in the cotton sector, which leads to maintained or increased production volumes and improved productivity [3].

CREATING POSITIVE RIPPLE EFFECTS IN COTTON COMMUNITIES 2

Increasing women's economic participation has far-reaching benefits, as **women tend to reinvest up to 90% of their earnings into their families and communities**, significantly more than the 30–40% typically reinvested by men [4]. This reinvestment drives community well-being, accelerates development, and plays an important role in breaking the cycle of poverty.

RESPONDING TO MARKET DEMAND 3

There is a growing demand from consumers and retailers to source sustainably produced cotton, specifically schemes that address gender inequality in the supply chain. Downstream demand will drive the uptake of better practices and provide an economic incentive for 1) farming communities to engage with women cultivators 2) for women cultivators to participate in the programme. To ensure we respond to market demand, Better Cotton will pilot **farmer incentive schemes to reward our farmers for their uptake of improved gender practices**, ensuring the sustainability of WICA.

ENHANCING GOVERNANCE OUTCOMES 4

While specific data on smallholder agricultural organisations is limited, broader corporate research consistently shows that the **inclusion of women in management teams and decision-taking roles leads to better corporate performance**. For example, a McKinsey report [5] showed that teams with 40–60% women and men had sustained increases in employee engagement (~4pp) and operating profit compared to male-dominated teams. [6] According to these studies, gender-diverse leadership led to better decision-making as it brings multiple perspectives. In the smallholder context this translates into women's representation in farmer producer organisation (FPO), which in India is still limited, and women-led FPOs, which are also a minority - constituting only 3.5% of total FPOs [7].

[1] THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS, FAO 2023

[2] NEWS DETAIL | CLIMATE CHANGE | FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

[3] CHAN, M.K. AND BARRIENTOS, S. (2010). IMPROVING OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN SMALLHOLDER-BASED SUPPLY CHAINS: BUSINESS CASE AND PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR INTERNATIONAL FOOD COMPANIES. PREPARED FOR THE BILL & MELINDA GATES FOUNDATION.

[4] CLINTON GLOBAL INITIATIVE (2011): CLINTON.PDF

[5] CHAN, M.K. AND BARRIENTOS, S., 2010.

[6] MCKINSEY GLOBAL INSTITUTE, "DELIVERING THROUGH DIVERSITY" (2018).

[7] 2024 HOW WOMEN-LED FPOS ARE TRANSFORMING INDIA'S AGRICULTURE - THE HINDU BUSINESSLINE



THE CHALLENGES

WOMEN'S ROLE AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN FARMING COMMUNITIES IS OFTEN UNACKNOWLEDGED AND UNDERVALUED. THEIR POTENTIAL IS HAMPERED BY BOTH LACK OF VOICE WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES AND LACK OF ACCESS TO OPPORTUNITY.

Women in cotton farming communities represent 46% of the world's 31.5 million cotton farmers. In India and Pakistan, up to 90% of paid cotton sector workers are women [8]. Yet, they face barriers that systematically exclude them from accessing the productive resources, knowledge, and networks needed to manage farms and participate in key decision-making processes.

With rural women's literacy rates in India at 66% [9] (compared to 81% for men), traditional training approaches are often not suitable for smallholder women farmers, creating significant knowledge deficits. Financial exclusion is another major hurdle: only 13% of women cotton farmers own land, limiting their ability to secure credit long-term [10]. Over 80% of women are financially illiterate [11] and only 26% of women in rural areas use mobile internet, compared to 47% of men [12].

These challenges are reinforced by deep-rooted social norms. In Gujarat, India, the traditional practice of *maryada* discourages women from entering male-dominated spaces, restricting women's ability to access markets, financial institutions and training [13].

JOIN US

Achieving gender equality in the cotton sector is an ambitious goal and we need partners able to drive the next phase of gender equality innovations in the global cotton value chain.

Results will be possible only through collective efforts, leveraging our unique position as a multi-stakeholder initiative to convene a **Coalition of Changemakers that will lead the uptake of responsible sourced cotton that positively impacts women**. With WICA, we aim at bringing together investors, advisors, knowledge partners and implementers, who will ensure the challenges women face at farm level are tackled in a comprehensive way.

Our 2030 Strategy makes sure we integrate present needs while looking at the future, capitalize on existing learnings and progress, close the gap to achieving impact, to then focus on rewarding good practices – while making sure no one is left behind.

In order to achieve this, we would like you to consider coming on board of WICA's Coalition of Changemakers, participating to the design of our projects in India and Pakistan, partnering and investing in sustainable solutions.



Get in Touch

Yasmin Zanini

Senior Coordinator for Grants and Social
Impact Initiatives
yasmin.zanini@bettercotton.org

Yrene Coli Rivera

Senior Gender Equality Coordinator
yrene.colirivera@bettercotton.org

[8] BETTER COTTON INDIA IMPACT REPORT 2023

[9] NATIONAL SAMPLE SURVEY OFFICE, INDIA

[10] OXFAM INDIA. 'MOVE OVER "SONS OF THE SOIL": WHY YOU NEED TO KNOW THE FEMALE FARMERS THAT ARE REVOLUTIONIZING AGRICULTURE IN INDIA', 15 NOVEMBER 2018. [HTTPS:// WWW.OXFAMINDIA.ORG/WOMEN-EMPOWERMENT-INDIA-FARMERS](https://www.oxfamindia.org/women-empowerment-india-farmers)

[11] HUMANITY WELFARE (2018) INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY: HOW FINANCIAL LITERACY CAN EMPOWER WOMEN IN INDIA - THE ECONOMIC TIMES

[12] INDIA'S PROGRESS ON DIGITAL INCLUSION STALLED IN 2022, SAYS GSMA REPORT | INDIA NEWS - BUSINESS STANDARD

[13] BETTER COTTON 2025 DRAFT BASELINE STUDY WICA GUJARAT, INDIA