



BUSINESS FIGHTS POVERTY ONLINE 2020: REBUILD BETTER

TRANSCRIPTION: EXPLORING THE COMPLEXITY OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN 2020

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THEME: **EQUITY**

FORMAT: **WEBINAR**

SPEAKERS

■ **Sandra Fontano**, Senior Global Sustainability Manager - Gender Equality, **Unilever**

■ **Ashika Gunasena**, CEO, **Chrysalis**

■ **Esther Kwaku**, Founder and CEO, **The Nerve Network**

■ **Hayley Morgan**, Senior Global Programme Coordinator, **Better Cotton Initiative**

■ **Moderator:** Hester Le Roux, Senior Economic Advisor, Policy and Advocacy, **CARE International UK**

IN THIS SESSION, HOSTED WITH **CARE INTERNATIONAL UK**, OUR PANELLISTS DISCUSSED THE THEME OF THE DAY, EQUITY, IN RELATION TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF TACKLING GENDER INEQUALITY TODAY. OUR SPEAKERS TOUCHED ON TOPICS RELATED TO SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES AND THE ROLE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY, HOW COVID-19 HAS BROUGHT RISKS OF SETBACKS BUT ALSO OPENED UP IMPORTANT OPPORTUNITIES, AND WHY INCLUSION AND EDUCATION REMAIN KEY MECHANISMS OF STRUCTURAL CHANGE.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (00:25):

Hi there, Katie, and thank you so much everyone for joining us for this webinar today. As Katie said, I'm Hester Le Roux. I'm the senior economic advisor on women's economic empowerment at CARE International UK, and it's my great pleasure to be your moderator for this session.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (00:42):

So, as most of you know, we're in day four of Business Fights Poverty's five-day event on Rebuilding Better. Building an equitable and resilient future is our scene, and each day, the spotlight has been falling on a different sub-scene. Today, all day, we are talking about equity. In our session, now, there is a focus to look at gender equity to give us some dedicated time and space to consider the complexities of gender inequality in our much-changed and ever-changing context, here and now, July

2020, while a global pandemic rages.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (01:14):

I don't need to tell you that the COVID-19 crisis has affected everyone, but not equally so. The pandemic is, of course, exposing and exploiting deep structural inequalities in economies and societies around the world. And gender inequality is one such critical issue which the pandemic has thrown into stark relief.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (01:32):

Just a few words about CARE. CARE is an international poverty-fighting and humanitarian aid organisation. We focus on gender justice and equality in vulnerable communities around the world, and we believe we're uniquely positioned at the interface between individual women, their communities, businesses, and partner organisations, to understand needs and



recommend action. We've worked with companies including Unilever, Diageo, and Twinings, to listen to the needs of women and their communities, and to co-create with them more gender-equitable business models. We also partner with organisations such as BCI, the Better Cotton Initiative, to support them on organisational gender journeys, whether that's through conducting gender needs assessments, staff capacity building, or input into their strategy design.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (02:21):**

To understand how COVID-19 has impacted gender inequality, we have completed 32 rapid gender analyses in different countries, and another 22 currently under way. And our research has found or confirmed that women are at increased risk of exposure to infection. As you know, 70% of global health and social workers are women. Women are routinely underrepresented or completely excluded from COVID-19 decision-making processes, women's unpaid care burdens are increasing, and opportunities for their economic participation decreasing. And the economic and other stresses are significantly increasing the risk of and the incidents of gender-based violence, GBV, with women and girls more exposed particularly to domestic violence at home. So, it's clear that the hard-won gains for gender equality in recent years are now seriously at risk.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (03:11):**

So, while many of us are in the midst of responding to the crisis, it's critical that we respond to the differing needs of women, and that we also explore how this time of social change could present opportunities to challenge negative gender norms and help achieve gender equality in the longer term. Bringing together our unique insights and partnership expertise, we are very pleased to host this afternoon's discussion to look at how different organisations have been listening to and learning from women to create more gender-equitable models in the context of COVID-19.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (03:44):**

We have a great panel with us who will

share their perspectives on these issues with us today. I will start by introducing them to you. We have Ashika Gunasena. She's the chief executive officer of Sri Lanka-based Chrysalis, and organisation working to empower women and youth by fostering inclusive growth. Ashika has been working in senior management positions in Sri Lanka's development sector for over 22 years, and she has specific technical expertise on gender-transformative approaches, gender-based violence, and on governance.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (04:14):**

We also have Hayley Morgan, senior global program coordinator at the Better Cotton Initiative. Hayley's been at BCI for four years. She focuses on gender equality and inclusion, partnership building, learning and development, and M&E. She developed and launched BCI's first gender strategy in 2019, and she also supported the implementation of the 2020 supply strategy.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (04:38):**

Esther Kwaku is the founder and CEO of The Nerve Network, a social enterprise which super-charges brilliant people living in remote low-income places to start their own businesses. During her 20-year career in the international charity sector, she has worked on fundraising, strategy, communications, and marketing, and on humanitarian issues in Sudan, the DRC, Ethiopia, Myanmar.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (05:02):**

And we have Sandra Fontano with us. She's the senior global partnership and advocacy manager for gender equality at Unilever. Sandra has been working at Unilever for nearly eight years now. She works on sustainability issues with the focus on partnerships and advocacy in the area of gender equality, and she has led on the development of global partnerships with partners such as Oxfam, the ICRW, and UN Women. And her focus areas include supporting Unilever brands on tackling unpaid care, engaging men and boys, and skills for girls and women.



**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (05:33):**

So, the purpose of our discussion today is to explore the complexity of gender inequality in the context of how organisations are responding to the COVID-19 crisis. We are looking at how organisations can build more sustainable and equitable models and approaches, and to create holistic strategies for tackling gender inequality. Each of our panelists will introduce their organisation's approach to gender equality before we delve a bit deeper through a series of guided questions. And we'll have an opportunity, of course, for some questions from our audience. So, do please, while you listen, if you think of anything you'd like to ask, post your questions in the chat column. Someone will be managing that for us. And indicate if your question is directed at the whole panel or someone specific.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (06:17):**

So, panel. Please, let's kick off with a brief introduction. Could you tell us what gender equality means to your organisation in the current context in 2020? And we'll start with you, Ashika.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (06:30):

Thank you very much, Hester, and thank you for the opportunity to be on this panel. 2020's, as you can imagine, been a very crazy year. And all of the indicators that you described have been true for Sri Lanka as well, and particularly has put women in an extremely vulnerable situation. So, for us, 2020, as much as it's been challenging, I think it's also been a year where we really begin to see the investments that we have made as an organisation on really promoting gender equality. So, for us, as much as it's been a challenge, it's also been a time where we have really seen the products of our investments in gender equality.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (07:17):

So, our work is really about getting women to the table. Women to the table in government decision-making processes, women to the table in our work with the private sector in Sri Lanka, but also women to the table in civic action. So, our work around gender equality has been about

really improving the women's agency and enabling them skills and knowledge, but also, importantly, looking at influencing and changing the structural barriers that impact their ability to really influence the way Sri Lanka develops, influence the way Sri Lanka defines its future.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (08:01):

And we have, therefore, been working a lot on, as I said, building capacities of women, but also making sure that they're able to really negotiate relations in their homes, in their community, and society at large. But also, looking at really impacting on societal norms, attitudes that continue to discriminate them. And that means also not necessarily only working with women and women's groups and women's movements in Sri Lanka, but also really engaging men. And how do we really begin to have a conversation about equality and gender equality in particular?

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (08:47):

And then we're also recognising that gender cannot be seen in isolation. We need to also look at the intersectionality of gender, because we do have different ethnicities, different religious groups, there's the issue of class and income disparities in this country. So, we are looking at gender broadly. That enables us to really understand all dimensions of it. So, it's not necessarily only about men and women, but it's also how do we really begin to challenge those norms that continue to discriminate women? And work like that.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (09:27):

So, our work, we work very much with community groups. And we work in networks and coalitions in Sri Lanka that promote equality, but also, we are more and more beginning to work with the private sector in Sri Lanka to enable the private sector to understand the cost of not addressing gender equality in their companies, in their value chains. So, that's been very important work for us in Sri Lanka. CARE was in Sri Lanka for a very long time, and as it left, we were established as an affiliate in Sri Lanka. So, we're really building on the great work that CARE had done in Sri Lanka

to really also influence the corporates.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (10:12):

So, we work in the tea sector, we work in the hospitality tourism sector, and also the power sector, where there are large numbers of women who are either employed in these sectors, but also have the opportunity to get employed but nevertheless haven't been. And one of the most important reasons for that is the gender inequality that persists in some of these industries.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (10:36):

So, let me stop there, Hester. And can take the questions as they come.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (10:41):**

Thank you so much, Ashika. Great introduction there. And we'll delve in a little more detail soon when we get around to the guided questions.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (10:49):**

Let's turn to Hayley next. Hayley Morgan from Better Cotton Initiative.

**Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton
Initiative (10:54):**

Hi, everyone. First, I'm just delighted to be here. Thank you so much for the invitation. And also following such an excellent session beforehand, it feels like a really privilege. So yeah, really happy to be here today to highlight women in cotton. I did prepare a few slides, but I'm actually happy to not use them. That's totally fine. So, I'll first just introduce the Better Cotton Initiative, who we are, what we do, and then talk a little bit about our work with gender equality, which I'll delve into a bit more in the guided question and answer session.

**Hayley Morgan - Better
Cotton Initiative (11:29):**

So, I lead the gender work stream here at BCI, but that's of course in collaboration with a great network of colleagues and partners. And I just want to highlight that recently there's been really great action-oriented coverage of how the current crisis is impacting women at factory level. But

further down the supply chain, farming communities essentially remain as invisible as ever, and in particular migrant laborers that support the production of cotton, and they're about to be hit with the knock-on effects of this crisis, so I'm really pleased to be able to highlight them today.

**Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton
Initiative (12:04):**

So, the Better Cotton Initiative. We are a multi-stakeholder membership organisation. We've created our own little universe. We steward a global standard that outlines seven principles for sustainable cotton production, and we believe that if Better Cotton farmers produce cotton in this way, then it will be measurably better for the environment and for farming communities. Ultimately, we hoped to become a sustainable mainstream commodity, so for the past strategic cycle from 2016 to now, we've been really focusing on scale. And to illustrate some of that scale, last year, enough Better Cotton was produced to make approximately eight billion pairs of jeans, so a pair for every person in the world. Today, we also work with over two million farmers directly through partnerships, so we work with over 70 field-level partners to deliver training on more sustainable practices.

**Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton
Initiative (12:59):**

So, sustainability to us is not just agronomic practices; we also deliver training on decent work issues, such as labor issues. And this work is driven by a membership network. So, we have over 1,900 members who represent the cotton industry. So, that includes spinners, civil society organisations, all the way to major global brands which we're probably wearing right now.

**Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton
Initiative (13:24):**

But my work is mainly focused on the field level, on the communities that we're trying to reach. So, while we have one global standard for Better Cotton production, the people who turn these principles into practices, they're very diverse, and they're located all around the world. So, we have projects in the United States, in

Mozambique and Turkey and India and China, and so all of the diverse needs and contexts of these different people, we have to consider them constantly. And also, 98% Better Cotton farmers are small holders as well, so they face particular challenges.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (14:03):

However, women's role in cotton production is often overlooked. I'm sure this is not a surprise to anyone here. And there are many factors for this, and there are many norms which have made this a reality. So, in many contexts as well, cash and export crops are really associated with men, while women are often more associated with subsistence food crops, but women are actually very much involved in cotton production.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (14:29):

So, at BCI, what gender equality means to us, we are trying to move the industry forward. So, we think that we have an opportunity to integrate gender equality as a cornerstone of sustainable cotton, and we believe that a transformed sustainable cotton industry is one where all participants have equal opportunities to thrive. And we have a lot of work to do there. Thanks.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (14:56):

Thank you so much, Hayley. It's a whistle-stop introduction. I realise there's a lot more that all of you can say, but the idea's just to give us a brief introduction, and then we'll delve a little bit deeper.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (15:06):

Next, we turn the Esther. Esther Kwaku, founder and CEO of The Nerve Network.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (15:12):

Hi, there. Thanks, Hester, and thanks. It's great to be on this panel, and it's great to be able to speak to everyone today. So, a very brief introduction. So, I run a social enterprise called The Nerve Network. I also do some work with CARE

and with ActionAid International.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (15:32):

So, my brief background is I worked in fundraising for a very, very long time. I'm not that young. So, I worked in fundraising for a very long time for different nonprofits small and large. My job was to tell stories, to go out into the field, and to listen to communities, and generate the stories and bring back to raise money for campaigns and for appeals. And really loved doing that and had been quite successful over that time. And at one point, I became a bit disillusioned, if I'm honest, with the narrative and the way that the story about international development and poverty was being told.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (16:23):

So, I chose to leave the sector and just go out into the world and discover other people who are making change happen in different ways. That led to me starting up The Nerve Network, which is a social enterprise. So, it's a business, not a charity, and what we do is we raise income through events, we work a lot in the international education sector, we sell products. All of the products is on our 100% model, so all the wares that we sell from the communities that we work with goes back to them.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (16:58):

So, we also focus on lots of partnership work with our local partners. It's mostly in Uganda. We're a startup, so we're starting off small and beautiful, get that right before we scale up, and focus on decent work, seeding business ideas, helping communities to think in a very innovative way, especially now in the era of COVID, where we have to be more inventive and be so creative and so resourceful. And it's really amazing what you find when people have so little. I think you all know that. We look for people that have the seeds of brilliant thinking, because we believe that they have the ideas. Right? And they do know, and it's always about finding the most powerful thing to unlock.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (17:45):

Yeah, that's a brief background. And we're coming out of our startup phase and moving to scale, looking at how we can form

different collaborations with other partners as well, and look for pockets of creativity and invention across different industries. So, what does gender equality mean with Nerve? We tend to focus on those who are most marginalised. We have a specific focus on people with disabilities, women and girls, women and girls with disabilities as well, people with disabilities affected by HIV and AIDS, so really marginalised, really going through some tough times.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (18:28):

So, it means for us amplifying those voices and also recognising the role that boys and men play, ensuring that we remove as many economic barriers to accessing justice, and really listening and talking to women and really getting at eye-level with them. The number of times I've been doing an interview, and I think we've probably all been there at one point, where you're doing an interview and someone else pipes up, or the husband or the male figure pipes up. So, we really try and get as close as we possibly can. And then other work we do is around advocacy and influencing on rights through our partners as well.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (19:10):

So, I'll leave it there and let others come in with their introductions. Thank you.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (19:14):

Thank you so much, Esther. Inspiring stuff. Our final panelist, as I said, is Sandra Fontano from Unilever. Sandra, over to you.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (19:23):

Excellent. Thank you, Hester. And thanks for having me on here.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (19:27):

So, very similar to what you were saying, Hester, in terms of we know that the impact that COVID is going to have on men and women is going to look very different. But we also have to recognise that actually empowering women and girls is one of the single most effective catalysts in order to unlock growth, and economic growth in particular. And as a business and a private sector, we have to recognise that it's not just a moral imperative for us, but that

economic reason to actually take action on this is there. The business case is there. The number everyone is probably very familiar with, the famous McKinsey number of unlocking the estimated 28 trillion is one that has been used and used just to be able to help everyone understand that. We don't need any more convincing in terms of why we actually need to take action.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (20:35):

For Unilever, it's very clear. Being an inclusive and gender-equal business helps Unilever. 64% of the consumer spending comes from women, 70% of our sales come from women, so that equation is there. Our vision for gender equality is that every woman can create the life and live the life that she wants to lead, that's unconstrained by norms and stereotypes. And that's also the same for men, because we understand the impact that those adverse norms and stereotypes also play on them. So, I think it's around making sure and enabling that economies are growing and creating equal opportunities for women and men. And in order for that to happen, it needs leadership, a continued leadership from government, civil society, business, et cetera, to be able to build that world.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (21:36):

As a business today, we've already been involved in some other areas where we can respond to COVID, obviously through soap and shifting some of the goods and the redeploying those manufacturing lines. But we also know that we've got, still, a crucial role to play in terms of leveraging our assets, our value chains, et cetera, to be able to try and find new ways to be able to build this inclusive world in a way that works for the post-COVID world, whatever that is. So, I think that we've got an opportunity now to reshape what that society and that economy can look like, but I think that it's going to take all voices to be there and everyone to be involved and making sure that everyone is there to be able to work out what that new world could look like. But yeah, that's it for me.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (22:34):

Thank you so much, Sandra. And thanks

again to panelists, all of you, for setting the scene for us in your quick overviews.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (22:42):

All right. We have a chance now to find out a bit more detail about your respective approaches, and if you'll allow me, I will lead the conversation with some questions, and I'll also say who the question is for. I'm going to start with Ashika. I wonder if you could tell us more about the risks and the opportunities you see COVID-19, the crisis, presenting for women in the communities in which Chrysalis works. And are there any particular heightened risks that organisations should be aware of?

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (23:16):

Thank you, Hester. Let me start with the opportunities, because we have been really, truly inspired by what women's groups have done in Sri Lanka in response to COVID-19, particularly in communities where we work, in some of the most rural, some of the most marginalised communities. These women were the ones that first got themselves organised, identified the need, and in circumstances where their voices were never heard. They were not invited to decision-making forums, but they collectively got together and prepared PPEs, because we have women entrepreneurs we work with who are engaged in the apparel sector. They collectively made face masks for thousands and thousands of first-responders. They made uniforms for the medical personnel. And this was without any instruction from anybody, so it was truly amazing to see how that leadership and that collective organising that they had been anyway doing in these communities made them the first-responders.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (24:30):

So, for us, it was a truly inspiring moment. And there were entrepreneurs that were able to actually switch their businesses to produce sanitisers, for example, and their turnover became double the amount that they had prior to COVID. So, for us, I think as all of you have said, we need to really unlock their potential, and there are many circumstances where we have. I think we need to really focus on this,

because when we talked about COVID, and I'm denying the risks that women are in, we tend to really also just look at the risk and the vulnerability. We rarely look at the leadership and their capacity and the resilience that they demonstrate under these very difficult circumstances.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (25:19):

So, for us, I think that enabled us to really then use these women's groups and their leadership to then channel the support that they need, because obviously, the need was getting great. So, we were able to really channel the support through them, because we were also under lockdown and we couldn't get to communities, but we had these women leaders, community leaders, community groups, that really worked with government, worked with the military to really get the first wave of support to communities. So, for us, that's been... And then also, I think the COVID-19 has also enabled, and I'll speak about them, the entrepreneurs we are working with.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (26:00):

Really, they have found markets that didn't exist for them before COVID, particularly in innovating in their product lines. And also, they were able to also support not only themselves, but also others in their value chain. So, women who were plucking herbs for their sanitisers, they were able to really generate more employment during this time.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (26:28):

That, for us, was truly inspirational, but that also meant that there are many, many risks that women were experiencing. We have done microservice where we work, and we found that a lot of women had to literally close down their businesses. Of the samples we have, 85%, say 75% of women had to close their businesses because they could not access raw materials and their markets were closed. And there were also circumstances where they were not really able to access the support services that they had, and not only necessarily to run their businesses, but also support services with regards to their sexual reproductive health, but also importantly on violence, because suddenly, women were locked



up with perpetrators in their homes.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (27:17):

And I think this is a statistic all over the world, but we also found that women suddenly lost their network, their ability to even go to other women's groups and talk about the issues. Their access to service has been provided by government and non-governmental organisations. So, I think that network was lost, and then suddenly, they found themselves really locked up in homes with the perpetrator. So, although there hasn't been many service done to the extent of this issue in Sri Lanka, what anecdotal evidence and our partners in the field do tell us that this is a hugely important issue. It's a really critical issue.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (28:05):

So, I think, as organisations, we need to be extremely aware of the fact that what COVID has done has really just heightened the inequality that existed. So, in knowing that, I think we need to then rely on our ability to really develop solidarity amongst women, and that's extremely important. And we are finding that everywhere we work. That solidarity that women have has to be in a real component of resilience, and we need to build that.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (28:38):

And also, I think it's very important for us to really work, not necessarily as civil society organisations or corporates, we need to really have a very holistic approach in the way we understand the problem and in the way that we find solutions. I think we really need to be, more so than ever before, really understand that there is a need for us to collaborate. There is a need for us to really build on each other's capacities and expertise and the opportunity.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (29:10):

So, let me stop there, Hester. But again, I have to say that I think what COVID-19 has done is also to really highlight the fact, and I think as Sandra said, I think we haven't unlocked the potential, and we need to continue to do that.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (29:28):

Thank you, Ashika. Lots of food for thought there.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (29:31):

This question has a slight community perspective. I wonder, Hayley, if you would mind taking us down the value chain perspective, and tell us: What have been some of the realisations within BCI, Better Cotton Initiative, regarding gender in the cotton value chain more broadly? And have these been shaped at all by COVID-19?

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (29:52):

Yeah, sure. Well, I'll first talk about our pre-COVID realisations. It feels like forever ago. But we've been on quite a journey. It's largely been a journey of learning, but also of trying to take action. So, I'll share that with you all, and then I'll chat a bit about what's happened since.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (30:10):

So, in late 2018, we really decided to take more action, and we wanted to do this based on data. So, we commissioned a baseline report and we hired two expert consultants who really became part of our team. They sat in our India and Pakistan offices. We studied what limited research was available about women in cotton. We conducted field interviews and visits with men and women and boys and girls, and we consulted with staff and partners, and with our council and with our colleagues. So, we collected lots of information. And then we took a step back and took a hard look at it, because we uncovered some uncomfortable realisations.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (30:56):

We uncovered that, globally, women account for only less than 7% of participating Better Cotton farmers, and women workers account for only 20% to 40% of training participants. But these figures do not represent at all the proportion of work that women contribute to cotton

production. So, we could see that there was a problem and there was a disconnect.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (31:17):

And to share some figures with you, in India, women are responsible for over 70% of weeding activities. In Pakistan, they conduct over 90% of picking activities. In West Africa, over 55% of planting activities. So, they're contributing a huge amount of labor. They have a huge volume of knowledge, but they were not being included in our programs to the level that we would've liked to see. And so, we needed to figure what was going on.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (31:44):

And we came to the realisation that there were some structural barriers within our system. Ashika mentioned decision-making before. And we have created some inadvertent barriers where our programs were mainly targeted towards those with the most decision-making power. However, this excluded women for a number of reasons, and we recognise that this is a problem. And we decided that we wanted to take action. So, in order to create this transformational change, we needed to address gender blindness in our systems, and we needed to do this through a strategy. So, we worked consultatively, and we mapped out opportunities, and we mapped out our different spheres of influence, which we found really helpful, because we are a large organisation and we're growing. So, we needed to focus in on our work.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (32:39):

So, we said these levels include the farm level, so our programs and partnerships. The sustainable cotton community level, so we have a large membership network, which I referenced earlier, and we host events and we have a platform as the largest sustainable cotton program in the world. And then also through our operations, we have over 100 people on staff, and we set policies and recruitment practices, and we can offer staff training to make change. And then we made a commitment to mainstream a gender-sensitive approach

through our operations to enable us to intentionally tackle inequalities. And then we defined an action plan. We set up a cross-functional working group, which has been really great, and we also set up some pilot projects. And we've also worked with CARE to deliver gender equality and diversity training to staff and to our council, and we've developed training content for our partners as well.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (33:36):

Again, this is a pre-COVID-19. And then this crisis has hit, and our plans and priorities unfortunately shifted. Like many organisations, we've been hit financially. Our field programs have been impacted. Practically, we've had to reduce scale. We've had less staff capacity. And we've been trying to always think about the health and wellbeing of our communities, where unfortunately, this virus is spreading now into rural communities. So, all of these challenges have had a direct impact on our progress related to gender equality.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (34:13):

Specifically, this year, we really wanted to centre women's voices, and we wanted to run more field consultations. And now, we've had to adapt to delivering this virtually, and this is a challenge, and we know that the findings that we gather will be less nuanced than what we could've collected if we'd done this in person. And then in some contexts, programs have been entirely put on hold because the risks are too great. For example, in Mozambique, generally our trainings attract more people than expected. They become a community gathering. But we can't take on that risk because we can't... yeah, the risk is too high. So, everything's been put on hold.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (34:53):

There have been many bright spots, however, of course, and our partners have adapted amazingly, our staff have adapted, and technology has really helped with this. So, our partners are regularly in contact with farming communities through WhatsApp, WeChat. They get personal calls,



they're texting, they're posting QR codes and posters in communities where people can access training materials. And also, our program teams have been delivering more training than ever on a wider range of topics, which is really exciting. We've now included topics on crop diversification, on ecological restoration, and they've had more time, basically, to engage with our partners and deepen those relationships.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (35:36):

And also, our partners really amazed us by actually delivering COVID-19 response. So, we primarily focus on agronomic practices, but there are health and wellbeing and decent work-related components of our standard. But we of course were not prepared to address a pandemic, but our partners really did adapt. They've delivered masks and sanitation equipment, they've delivered health messaging, because we have the networks in place, so that's been really exciting to see.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (36:04):

However, we also have concerns particularly about how much these efforts are reaching women, and I have more questions than answers, so I'll be very honest with you all. Technological innovations are great, but ultimately, how inclusive are they? Are the women in our programs, do they have access to this technology? Do they have smartphones? Are they able to even access these QR codes? Do they even have the time? So, we're really asking that constantly.

Hayley Morgan - Better Cotton Initiative (36:33):

Fortunately, we do still have two active pilots, and so we're hoping to gather some information through virtual scoping studies. Yeah, generally, we feel hopeful. We haven't wavered in our commitment to delivering our strategy, but the timeline has definitely been challenged, and we've all been challenged with new responsibilities and new concerns that we never expected. And I'm sure this feeling is shared by everyone.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (37:02):

Thank you so much for sharing so honestly and freely, Hayley. That's really helpful. And great to get a glimpse into the real insides of an organisation and where these effects are felt. In fact, you've already half-answered one of the questions I saw come in about addressing the digital divide and how this is actually widening at the moment and what that means for delivery of some of these interventions. We may return to that if we have time.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (37:26):

Great. Esther, my question to you. And now, we've looked at the community angle, we've looked at the supply chain angle, and now you are working with individuals. So, I'd like to ask you about your network. The Nerve Network is about unlocking the power and potential of individual women and girls. How do you go about facilitating that, and how has the COVID crisis changed your approach, if at all?

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (37:48):

Yeah. Well, yes. [crosstalk 00:37:51] I'm sure it has for many others, and still asking questions, as Hayley referred to. We don't necessarily have all of the answers, but we're doing a lot of learning right now. So, I will also start with the pre-COVID situation.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (38:05):

We've been quite fortunate enough, because we are a startup, that we are agile and nimble and we're able to really sit with women under the mango trees, and that's what we do, essentially. So, when we created Nerve, and while we did some scoping and we looked at all the micro-businesses, and I did a whole tour of Uganda to get the thoughts and feelings and data as well from organisations, and took that away. And when I went back, rather than hand over a model and a program and then say, "Based on the needs, this is what we feel is right for you." I sat with women under the mango trees again and said, "What do you need Nerve to be? This is your business, this is our model. Let's create this together." And it's so interesting when you ask that question. The way the

posture just changes just to be asked that question is such a tremendous thing when you really get that one-on-one time.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (39:11):

I want to introduce you to someone, because quite often, we have these conversations about women in the grassroots, and they're not in the room with us, so I wanted to bring someone in the room with us. And her name is Margret Nakayiza. Isn't she lovely? This is Margret. So, she is the main protagonist of our story. She is our heroine, she's amazing. And Margret was one of these ladies that I asked about Nerve and what she needed it to be. What does she need it to be? And I won't go into the backstory, because it's a backstory of real challenge and diversity. She's a woman who is visually impaired. She's also living positively. She's HIV-positive, and when we discovered her, was on the verge of taking her own life. That's how in the depths that she was.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (40:07):

We've been working with Margret for a few years. And so, when I went back to Uganda on this discovery visit and I asked her, her dreams had just gone from really big and bold, and we were bouncing off ideas, which is what we do. And she told us that one of the things she wanted to do was set up a centre, a resource centre where she could rear chickens and teach kids how to rear chickens. And then we bounced some more ideas, and we told her about the concept of Airbnb, so now Margret wants an Airbnb in this resource centre. So, the dreams have just gotten bigger and bigger.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (40:48):

So, now what we've done is we've invested in a plot of land for her. So, if you scroll to the next picture, you'll see Margret. This is a plot of land which we helped her to invest in, and we contributed to that. She's now a landowner. She's now a landowner for the first time, and we are building a centre to look at training in work and agriculture. Someone mentioned crop diversification earlier. So, this whole piece of land and the resource centre will be a way to Margret to cascade her knowledge down and

also be a focal point in the community.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (41:28):

And so, that's really what we do is we have these conversations, and we do work with the brilliant few. We don't make big claims here for reaching millions of people, actually. What we find works better in this phase that we're at is to find the brilliant few who can then power up the others and find the others. It's a harder job to do to find 200 people that will actually fire up 999,800. So, we like to work in that really small, get it right, and pilot things.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (42:02):

And rather than provide them with answers, we do ask, "What do you need, what do you want, and what do you have?" Sometimes, it's just about the conversation. It's not even always about money. Sometimes, it's just recognising that Bira, who is a banana pancake maker but wants to be a fashion retailer, needs the day off. She just needs a four-day work week and someone to look after the kids and data and mobile and transportation, and all of those things that unlock her ability to even be an entrepreneur. So, it's those kind of things. And I think someone alluded to that earlier. It's really about listening, it's about observing what's going on around them.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (42:39):

Quite often, one of the first things I do when I reach a place to meet a person is look at who is looking at the person that I've come to visit, because quite often, the story's there. Quite often, if we're talking about women and girls, and you look at these communities, and there'll be some that are like this, and then there'll be some that are a bit more curious. And quite often, you really get to understand what's going on in the community in order to help that woman or girl child unlock their potential.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (43:10):

So yeah, there's a lot of listening that we do. And has COVID changed this approach? Of course, because we can't do that anymore. So, our local partners, they're our ears and eyes. We trust them to know what's going on. We have played around with tech, virtual Skillshares, demonstrations, mentoring

to respond to COVID. Shall we make face masks? Yes. Get it wrong a few times, come back with the right thing. We're good. So, it's giving them the space to breathe and be innovative, especially in this time.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (43:42):

We really rely on them a lot more now, but also, we rely on... This kind of answers the second question, Hester, I think you're going to ask, so I'll just cover it all now, which is about bringing... So, we work with brilliant freelancers. The network part of Nerve is that we have a squad of really brilliant folks who are specialists in IT and digital, and I know that there was a question about the digital divide, that are working... because we can't all do it ourselves. So, if there are brilliant folks all over the world that can just come and scrum or huddle with our communities, over Teams, over WhatsApp, and all these other things, then that's also helping to shift things along. We're trying, we're testing, we're learning, and that's where we are.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (44:27):

I'm loving this spirit of innovation and trying things out. And not all of them will work, but some will. I mean, none of us have been in this situation before. The pandemic is unprecedented in its skyline, and we're still learning about impact. So, I think it's so true that you just have to go out there and try some things.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (44:45):

Sandra, if I can turn to you now for the big multi-national corporate perspective. Unilever, of course, it's been a milestone year for your sustainable living plan. And I wondered if you could share with us how a large organisation learns to listen and to respond to the needs of women within the organisation and in its operations to really embed gender inequality.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (45:08):

Sorry, Sandra, before you answer that, I just want to let everybody know that we have been monitoring the questions, and some of you have asked specific

questions to panelists that responded to those. Some questions, I know, have already been answered, but we'll try to pick out in a few minutes the topics that have not been addressed yet, so please do keep posting your questions in the chat box. Sandra, over to you.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (45:31):

Great, thanks. Thanks, Hester. To the question, which is around how does a large organisation learn to listen, I think that... It may sound obvious, but I guess probably one of the easiest or of the biggest unlocks is the commitment from leadership, because that then creates that enabling environment in order to be able to allow you to actually understand that there are programs, initiatives, that need to take place. And that in order to be able to do them properly, both to Ashika's point and to Esther's point, it's about actually helping to finding ways to co-create, finding ways to be able to understand how do you see the opportunity, build on the opportunity, and how do you do it with them and not necessarily for them? So, that whole piece... being able to have that commitment to say, "Okay, we know that we need to tackle X, or we know that we need to support this community," being able to do it in that collaborative way I think is one of the biggest pieces, and that is often helped by that unlock that sometimes the leadership can do.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (46:59):

Specifically, an example of just how we've done that is through some of our safety work, which has been around promoting safety for women in our extended supply chain. We've worked very closely with partners such as UN Women in order to engage communities and to listen to them, so co-create those solutions with them. And it's by co-creating those solutions with them that actually... they then go on to build the trust in the processes and the policies that you put in place, because the intention there is to be able to... for them to see how they have inputted in to that.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (47:44):

Very simple example, but in one of the tea plantations, as a result of some of the listening, there was an introduction

of a regular bus service that transports women from the tea garden so that they could feel safer on their way. Sometimes, they're very simple and easy things, but actually the kind of difference that it can make to the communities that we're trying to serve, then it could be huge.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (48:11):

There's also something around demonstrating that commitment to having an impact that goes beyond just the one intervention: by engaging the whole community. Again, I think to the point around... it's listening to the women, but also listening to the managers, understanding what kind of interventions you need to also do for children in order to be able to start to shift some of the norms, engaging with the men as well. Again, depending on what it is that you want to do, but just being able to understand that often, norms, deep-rooted norms, harmful norms are there, and can... the crux of it, and trying to tackle that is not a one solution. There's no one thing that's just going to be able to unravel it all, and it takes time, and it takes a holistic approach. But being able to do that also demonstrates that intent to be able to have a deeper impact.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (49:24):

And then just being able to... I guess, from that, being able to share the learnings and understand the journey. I think that everyone has shown here that actually no one has the golden bullet, the silver bullet, but everyone has a journey that they're going on, and from that, has learnings to share with the wider community, which I think is in partial of what this whole thing is.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (49:52):

Even from the work that we've done with UN Women, there was a framework, a global safety framework for rural spaces that was developed for other agricultural supply chains to start to look through that lens at their supply chains and just be able to understand, "If I want to tackle something like this, how do I even go about it? What are some of the steps that I need to start looking at or thinking about, and how do you do that?" I think that piece there helps everyone understand that

it's a learning journey for everyone, but there's lots for all of us to take from it, both those who are going through it and those who want to start on that journey and don't quite know how to do it. Therefore, that creates probably a bit more of an honest conversation between everyone, to be able to say, "Actually, yep. This is how we tried it." Then, hopefully, it's a build-in, something that people can then build on in order to be able to do that.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (51:00):

That's great. Thanks. Sandra, I'm interrupting you-

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (51:03):

That's fine.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (51:03):

... but I'm just noticing that the time is starting to run out.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (51:06):

Of course.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (51:08):

Just wanted to say I think there's recognition across our sector for the way that Unilever is happy to share its learnings. And the guide that you've just referred to is a great example of that, and I think events like this also gives us an opportunity to learn from one another, recognising that we're all in a brand-new, challenging space.

Hester Le Roux - CARE International UK (51:27):

We had in mind another round of questions for our speakers, but I am going to take an executive decision here to rather relay some of the questions that have come in from our audience, if panelists will allow me, please. We only have about eight minutes left, so let's try to keep our answers incredibly short so that perhaps each panelist can have one more chance to just make a final comment in response to some of these questions.



**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (51:50):**

So, there's a question that I'm going to direct to Ashika. You spoke about women identifying and responding to opportunities on their own. The question is: How can business improve the ways in which we recognise women as leaders and listen to the solutions and responses that they have identified, first and foremost?

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (52:10):

I think it's very important, as I said. The conversations under the mango tree is very important, Esther. I fully support that. But I think something that we have done very quickly, our work in the tea sector, for example, where we've created a forum whereby the tea plantation management companies and the women workers come together to discuss not necessarily only the welfare of the worker, but also about the productivity of the tea estates. And we were able to really showcase that if you invest a dollar in this forum, there is huge returns for the company, but huge returns for the workers, but also huge returns for the government that is supporting these communities.

Ashika Gunasena - Chrysalis (52:54):

I think, to answer your question, Hester, we really do have to connect the different parts of... as you were saying, Sandra, I think it's really important for us to really connect and really ask very genuine question about how do we find holistic solutions that not only really supports communities and the equality, but also supports the economic growth of a sector or of a country. Because these two things are related to each other, and I think that's what we need to start having very honest conversations about, and I think we need to also start really counting how much we gain and how much we lose if we don't have that collaboration with the workers and with the businesses.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (53:44):**

Great. Thank you so much. There was a lot of reference to these discussions under the mango tree. And of course, at the moment, it's very hard for all of us to get under the mango tree,

and we've got so many restrictions on our movements and our contact.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (53:56):**

And [Uran 00:53:57] asked a question about the digital divide which is increasing. I referred to it briefly before. Esther, I wondered if you could say a few words about the digital divide, especially for underserved communities, and specific actions we could try to take now, with the private sector potentially, to help women access digital and be part of the solutions to tackle gender equality. And you have alluded to some of these already in your earlier remarks, but do you see a particular role for companies to support this?

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (54:25):

Absolutely. I think, especially in the space around access to cache and telecommunications, from some of the very basic things that we know communities need, like working phones, and for teams that we work with so that they can gain the intel and data and do that M&E work. Does it necessarily need to be driven from the hubs where we sit? I think yes is the answer to that. There's lots of work that we can do, but also recognising some of the restraints of, again being very practical, bandwidth, and the fact that you don't just arrive in a town and everything's there. Quite often, the communities you're working with are two hours in, they're very deep. So, I think it's a combination of technology and other resources that we can mobilise, and networks that we can mobilise in order to work alongside that technology as well.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (55:28):

But I think there are... I'm seeing lots of great work happening around drone technology, for example, and again with microfinance and different formats, but I think it needs to be more... it's not enough, it needs to be big enough. So, how can we take what learnings are already happening and innovations that are already happening and connects with those groups as well to provide faster solutions? I don't know how good an answer that is.



**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (55:59):**

I know it feels like we're asking more questions than we're actually answering.

Esther Kwaku - The Nerve Network (56:03):

Yeah, yeah.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (56:04):**

Great. Thank you so much, Esther. There's a followup question to Sandra. You referred to the women's safety network that you developed with UN Women, the tools you're developing. This is a learning journey, you reminded us. We were wondering, in times like this when things are moving very quickly, how do you adapt and how do you measure progress in a context where we started the year with one set of expectations and everything's changed? How do you adjust and keep building as you go during times like this? We're on our final three minutes, I've just been reminded.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (56:34):

That's fine. I'll make it quick. I mean, I think we have to be realistic. I don't think that there's much choice that actually any of us have to hold ourselves up to the same expectations that we had this time last year and put that same kind of pressure on ourselves, on the teams on the ground, on our partners, et cetera. I think that it takes an element of trust and understanding that the reality is a very different reality. But actually, what it may also provide is, perhaps there's additional opportunities that actually many of these things can do. Perhaps it's about actually innovating or finding alternative ways to connect communities or to bring them together in slightly different ways.

Sandra Fontano - Unilever (57:28):

I don't think it necessarily means that things just need to stop and that's it, but actually, it's about understanding everyone is in this same position. Everyone is having to suddenly just reevaluate and understand... Okay, where is it that we want to go in this slightly new... We know we want to have this impact. What alternative things can we start to do to perhaps create that enabling environment so that when we can get

back into the communities, things can go faster? Or is there alternative ways, be it through digital or anything else that can... I don't think we have any choice but to be realistic about how much our hands are tied in comparison to where we were, but I think it's also actually about understanding there can be alternative ways in which we connect, engage, innovate, that can potentially be equally beneficial, or just beneficial of a slightly different way that can eventually help when we can get back on track. But yeah, I think that's probably it.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (58:40):**

Thank you, Sandra. And I see there was a question already answered in the chat box. It was addressed to Hayley. Thank you, Hayley, for doing that. Just to remind everybody, a recording of the session will be made available, and I believe that comments will also be available in the recording, so some of you will have your questions answered in the chat already.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (59:01):**

So, we are out of time, I'm afraid. Brings our discussion to a close. I'd just like to thank our panelists, Ashika Gunasena, Hayley Morgan, Esther Kwaku, and Sandra Fontano, for making time to be with us today, for sharing so generously their experience and insights. There goes my church bell, which is my alarm clock, so I know we're out of time completely.

**Hester Le Roux - CARE
International UK (59:21):**

Thank you, Business Fights Poverty, for convening the event, for making space for this conversation. Kay looks forward to ongoing collaboration with you, with BFP in this space. And thank you to everyone that's joined us online. We hope you found it useful to have this space to explore a better future for gender equality, whether you're at the start of your organisation's gender journey, or you're looking to evolve to a more mature diversity agenda. And all that remains for me to say right now is thank you once again.



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Enjoy the rest of your day. Many thanks.

**Katie Hyson - Business Fights
Poverty (59:51):**

Thank you!