

Half the sky

By Meghan Sapp

Women play an important role in the sugar industry, and it's not just in the "back office".

All too often, the topic of women in sugar is limited to labour issues in sustainability audits, but it goes so much deeper than that. Mao Zedong is quoted as saying [“Women hold up half the sky.”](#) an image that beautifully points to the fact that although hundreds of millions of women, and some would argue billions, are not seen that way, they are half of the human race.

Millions of women all over the world took to the streets on March 8 to celebrate [International Women’s Day](#) in an effort to draw attention to the inequalities in wage, caregiving, legal and human rights, control of their bodies, racism, and a long list of grievances that will no doubt make men in the sugar industry roll their eyes and move past this column.

But doing so would be short sighted. If it’s only five more minutes in a year that you think about the role of women in sugar, then that in its self is a small achievement. Know, however, there is a lot more thinking going on about the role of women in the industry and along the supply chain and not spending more than five minutes a year on it may not only be a bit arcane but also detrimental to your bottom line. [Even 15 years ago, data showed that Fortune 500 companies with women on their board far outperformed those who didn’t](#), so what’s the hold up?

Take, for example, the [Women in Sugar events](#) that Charlotte Kingsman of ECRUU has been developing with the support of Macquarie’s Women@Macquarie networking programme at the New York and Dubai sugar events. In Dubai this year, some of the gender

integration and development work that Alvean is undertaking was shared with the attendees to help understand what’s being done within that particular business. More companies within in the trade are no doubt making strides in this area and should stand up so the rest of the industry follows their lead.

If they don’t, however, don’t expect the status quo to protect them. Just this week, a federal court judge in Manhattan awarded [a former employee of Domino Sugar US\\$13.4 million in compensatory and punitive damages due to long-term sexual harassment by her boss](#) that led to him smacking her in the rear—and a lawsuit. In Dubai, far too much of the conversation during the sidelines of the event came back to sharing experiences related to the [#MeToo](#) movement. In such a male dominated industry, no one is surprised by sexual harassment in the sugar industry but it’s not being tolerated as it once was. The stronger networks become among women, the stronger their confidence will become and the less they are going to stand for harassment. When they reach the boiling point, chances are it will end in a repeat of the Domino case, but this time the case will be among the trade, not something "that just happens" on the factory floor. It doesn’t have to happen though—the harassment can stop before reaching a breaking point.

From inequalities in production where women often don’t have the right to buy or own property, let alone access finance that would allow them to be productive cane farmers, to those working in the fields and in the mills, among the many facets of logistics and “back office” that get sugar from the millgate to the plate, to traders and brokers and bankers, women hold up half the sugar industry. It’s time the rest of the industry took notice.