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Women Rock Drinks

Women Rock Drinks was a brilliant discussion on gender and equality in the drinks industry between a group of passionate experts. Hosted by **Stephanie Jordan**, Co-Founder of Avallen Spirits and Drinks International Woman of the Year 2020, the webinar highlighted fresh insights into areas such as gender imbalance at board level, the challenges of being a working woman, and the impact of mentoring.

Our experts also revealed how gender equality can make a real difference to the bottom line.

What's the gen?

Perhaps unsurprisingly the discussion initially focussed on the extent of gender imbalance within the drinks industry.

Sarah Wildman-King, Founding Partner and Managing Director at WonderWorks told us about some recent and positive changes in gender equality, but she also warned that there are still challenges out there.

Mélanie Chevalier, Founder and CEO of Creative Culture, then painted a stark picture of the state of gender inequality

- 104 countries (88 per cent of nations) still legally restrict women from working in certain industries. That's 2.7bn women worldwide.
- 59 countries provide no legal protection against sexual harassment at work.

According to an IBM survey from 2019 of 2,300 organisations across nine countries:

- Only 18 percent of leadership positions were held by women
- And 79 of those companies actually admitted they had not prioritised gender balance leadership (despite the proven positives of having women at leadership level).

The benefits of balance

Emma Heal, Managing Director of Lucky Saint, the non-alcoholic beer brand drilled down into what gender equality can mean for business.

According to a McKinsey report, a balanced board means better performance. Companies will perform 50 per cent better in terms of profits and share value if they have a gender balance, especially at a senior level.

The UK Government is taking the material benefits of gender equality seriously. If the UK can decrease the gender gap, the GDP could increase by two per cent, that's £55bn.

Emma described how diversity at board level avoids the dangers of 'group think' where a homogeneous group can get behind one idea without interrogating it. And she also explained how wider diversity is positive across all businesses.

Nick Gillett, Managing Director of Mangrove UK, the premium spirits importer spoke about the benefits to having more women in senior positions and in key decision-making areas as a driver of commercial success. He pointed out that having a gender balance not only ensures that a range of voices in an organisation, it avoids conscious or unconscious bias, meaning that all clients are equally served.



*“If you can
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RACHEAL VAUGHAN JONES

Mentor for the future

But how do you get to this level of diversity in senior roles? One of the most striking points in the webinar is the need for female visibility. “If you can see her, you can be her”, said **Racheal Vaughan Jones**, drinks SME marketing consultant, host of the podcast Building Liquid and founder of small batch whisky company, Jackson Jones.

Racheal described entering the corporate world from university and being struck by the lack of women at board level. She spoke powerfully about mentoring and the importance of building relationships.

Her message was clear. Seek out woman who are ten steps ahead of you who can offer support, networking opportunities and advice. And play it forward, by becoming a mentor yourself.



Beware the Queen Bee

There may be a sting in the tail though, as Stephanie warned that not all women are supportive by default. Some women use a lot of male traits in order to make it to the top. And women can be very competitive amongst themselves which is an important fact to recognise and address. It also forces women to seek male allies who can amplify their voices and not hesitate to ask men to help break through male dominated discussions.

Men were also challenged to take the initiative if they see women being side-lined in meetings. They should use their power and influence to help women claim their stake in what has traditionally been a male dominated environment.

Gender on a global scale

Even if an employer has taken strides to improve the gender imbalance within a company, there are still significant challenges within the wider drinks industry.

Gemma Paterson, Global Brand Ambassador for The Balvenie spoke passionately about her role and career at The Balvenie, describing the women in Scotch whisky who had inspired her and the growing number of women now in the team.

However, she did not shy away from outlining the challenges faced by young women working in the traditionally masculine world of whisky. “A lot of global markets had never worked with a woman before,” she said. “They were used to seeing either a Scotsman in a kilt or models.”

This attitude had to be addressed head on when people in one market expressed doubts that they could even work with Gemma. The issue was overcome by Gemma just doing her job well; by visiting the market and hosting a number of events, she showed that gender was not a barrier.

Culture clashes


Unfortunately, perseverance is not the answer to all aspects of gender inequality in the global drinks industry, so nuance and sensitivity is needed. As Mélanie explained, if you work globally you have to be sensitive and understanding. In essence, we may not like or agree with the restrictions or cultural norms put upon women in different areas, but we have to work within them.

But how much is there still a gender bias in the drinks industry? Reflecting on the Scotch whisky market, Gemma had mixed feelings, “I get asked a lot if I really liked whisky, and many of my female colleagues still get asked a lot. We have to work hard to prove that we are knowledgeable.” However, Racheal was a more frank, “If we are 100 years away from gender equality, in the whisky world we are 200 years away”.

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GEMMA PATERSON





“If we are 100 years away from gender equality, in the whisky world we are 200 years away”

RACHEAL VAUGHAN JONES

There is also the wider issue of the ‘boys’ night out’ culture of the drinks industry and how women can combat that. As an example, Stephanie explained how her refusal to participate in client trips to strip clubs became a positive for her clients; by rejecting these events, she gave her clients and co-workers the welcome option to step away from these situations.

So, how do we improve things?

All of the speakers at the event were nothing if not practical in their advice on how to tackle gender equality, but there was also the recognition that women in the drinks industry face the same issues as all working women, especially when it comes to juggling the time and cost demands of having children.

And as many women have found, there is no magic solution. Enlisting family help and having a supportive partner seem to be the most valuable elements when trying to achieve some kind of balance, but these are things that cannot be conjured out of thin air.

There is still a consensus that there is still a long way to go before women can have gender balance in the home and in the workplace. “We need gender pay reporting,” said Emma, “and we need flexible working to help give women an equal footing.”

Changing the language is also key. Mélanie urged us to embrace communications as a way to increase diversity and inclusivity. “You cannot reverse thinking that has taken centuries to build,” she warned, but she was adamant that language is extremely powerful, and by changing our language we can change our thinking.

However, perhaps the most powerful weapon we can use to fight inequality is women themselves. By showing companies the positive effect of gender balance on their bottom line the cause of equality will advance, and by raising up and celebrating women, upcoming generations can see what is possible.

Perhaps Stephanie summed it up best. She said, “I personally believe that women should have a seat at every table where decisions are made all around the world. And I really believe that for our industry.”

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STEPHANIE JORDAN



HOW TO DEAL WITH GENDER BIAS

Find a mentor

“If you can see her, you can be her”. A mentor can offer support, guidance and motivation.

Be a mentor

Not only will you be supporting the next generation of women in the drinks industry, mentoring can help build management skills, provide inspiration, and keep you in touch with different levels of the industry.

Network

Network wisely to find contacts, exchange ideas, and develop a more holistic view of the drinks industry.

Your differences are your advantages

Employers increasingly recognize that different voices are vital in decision making. So don't try to be anyone you are not. Embrace what makes you unique.

Show your passion

Know your brand, product, or area to the nth degree. There is still a gender imbalance in the drinks industry, so women have to show knowledge and commitment in every aspect of their job.

The session was guest hosted by *Stephanie Jordan*, Co-Founder of **Avallen Spirits** and **Drinks International Woman of the Year 2020**.

Our speakers were:



Mélanie Chevalier

Founder and CEO Creative Culture. Mélanie is 2021 Female Frontiers Honouree in the Championing Change category.



Nick Gillett

As MD of premium spirits importer, Mangrove UK, Nick is used to disrupting the UK spirits market. And more disruption is needed – our industry should reflect our marketplace, with talent, creativity and hard work creating a positive drinks industry for all.



Emma Heal

MD of Lucky Saint, a passionate advocate of championing women in industry; ambassador for Retail Week's Be Inspired programme and Steering Group Member for The Grocery Girls.



Gemma Paterson

Global Brand Ambassador for The Balvenie. Gemma's whisky journey has taken her around the World connecting with drinkers, telling stories and sharing drams.



Racheal Vaughan Jones

Drinks SME marketing consultant, host of the startup-focussed podcast Building Liquid and founder of small batch whisky co, Jackson Jones.

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