

Women Leaders Network of APEC: Background, Genesis and Vision

by

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This year, Chile is hosting the 9th meeting of the Women Leaders Network of APEC. As we approach our tenth anniversary and with so many new participants, timing is ripe to revisit the background and genesis of this unique network and to remember the vision of those women who first recognized the need to ensure the active recognition and participation of women in the APEC process.

Launched in Manila in October, 1996 as the Network of Senior Women Leaders from APEC Economies, the genesis of the Network lies with the Indonesian Institute of Science and Technology which organized the International Workshop on Women and Technology in Southeast Asia and the Pacific in January, 1996 where the importance of APEC as a point of intervention was first recognized.

This meeting was followed by another in March, 1996 when senior women leaders from the public and private sectors in science and technology with expertise on the gender dimension in trade, investment and development cooperation met in Jakarta to determine how gender issues and interests could be integrated within the APEC process. The Philippines Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and the Asian Alliance of Appropriate Technology Practitioners (APPROTECH ASIA), a non governmental organization, convened the workshop, with the UNESCO Regional Office of Science and Technology as host and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) as donor. The Network was organized with members from Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand with Viet Nam as an observer.

In April 1996 the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW) and the DOST convened a Strategy Workshop on the Positioning of Gender, Science and Technology for the APEC Forum in Manila in November. The Network formed a Planning Group to organize the October WLN launch with DOST, Department of Trade and Industry, NCRFW, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA), APPRTOTECH ASIA and Women for Women (Phils. Inc.) as members.

In October, 1996, one month before the APEC Leaders Summit, the WLN convened for the first time and met under the theme of 'Gender, Trade and Investment Liberalization, and Economic and Technical Cooperation for Sustained Growth and Equitable Development'. This rather lengthy and cumbersome theme was taken directly from the 'pillars' of TILF and ECOTECH of APEC and to reflect the need for gender integration into APEC's own agenda. Chaired by Dr. Amelia Ancog, Undersecretary for the Philippine Department of Science and Technology and Dr. Elena Lim, President of Solid Group of Companies and President of Women for Women (Phils. Inc.) that first meeting consisted of 60 invited women leaders representing 14 of the then 18 APEC member economies. Hosted by the NCRFW with a multi economy organizing committee and

funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (Southeast Asia Gender Equity Program) and UNIFEM the Network was able to present its Call to Action directly to President Ramos of the Philippines who pledged to forward it to his fellow APEC Leaders in November.

Originally named the Network of Senior Women Leaders from APEC Economies to reflect the language used in 'Senior Officials' meetings, the core group agreed to rename the group as the Women Leaders Network of APEC and set plans to meet again in Canada in 1997. Since, then, women from all APEC economies have come together every year to ensure that women are fully integrated into the APEC process.

The original purpose of the WLN was stated as 'to seek ways and develop strategies so that women's concerns are heard, their aspirations considered, and their involvement firmly established when decisions and policies are made within APEC'. The meeting specifically aimed to:

- Foster regional cooperation to advance the status of women in Asia and the Pacific;
- Formulate a framework for gender considerations to be included in developing human resources and in pursuing sustained growth and equitable development in the region;
- Organize a pool of experts to serve as partners and whose expertise could be tapped in identifying the gender dimension within APEC; and,
- Orient the participants on APEC and its structures and how these can be maximized as possible points for policy interventions.

At the end of the meeting, the Network presented President Ramos of the Philippines with a Challenge...A Call to Action for APEC Leaders to:

- Recognize and integrate gender as a cross-cutting theme in APEC
- Develop a partnership with the Network to identify mechanisms to achieve this objective; and
- Recognize the Network as a flexible, consultative forum and a strategic partner toward the achievement of the APEC vision, goals and action agendas.

What made this meeting and the Call to Action particularly successful is that the original concept for the Network had support at the highest levels of government. The NCRFW is the Women's Machinery in the Philippines and hence had the support of their government. Canada signified its commitment and support by supplying most of the funding not just to establish the WLN but also to guarantee its existence and success for the inaugural meeting and the following four years – in total a five year commitment which involved more than \$1 million. In addition, the NCRFW ensured the success of this meeting by educating participants about APEC and the APEC process including the particular language that APEC officials use. Heavily involved in the process were senior Philippine APEC officials as well as the APEC Secretariat. The founding group worked with these officials into the early hours of the mornings to ensure that the wording on

their Declaration was correct and we had complied with proper APEC protocol and procedures.

The second meeting of WLN was convened in Ottawa - Hull, Canada in September, 1997. The Network was now called Women Leaders Network of APEC and the theme for that year was chosen to coordinate with the theme for the SME Ministerial meeting: 'The Economic Impact of Women in the APEC Region'. Through the work of the multi-sectoral organizing committee chaired by Susan Davies, then Director of CIDA for Southeast Asia, there was a close collaboration with senior government officials throughout the entire year and which resulted in WLN being formally invited to make recommendations directly to the Ministers Responsible for SME's for the first time. WLN was co-chaired by:

- Huguette Labelle, President, CIDA, Co-chair
- Andrina Lever, President, Lever Enterprises, Co-chair
- Dr. Lorna Marsden, President, York University, Co-chair

and included the participation of 200 women leaders invited from 16 of the then 18 APEC economies. In addition to women leaders, for the first time one of the then three women members of ABAC (Dr. Dorothy Riddle) participated and there was participation by the Asia Development Bank, UNIFEM, and private sector sponsors. Four of Canada's most senior government Cabinet Ministers attended including the Minister for Foreign Affairs, then Minister for International Trade, the Honourable Sergio Marchi who confirmed the first Canadian all women's trade mission to the United States to be held later in 1997, the Minister for Industry and the Minister for Status of Women Canada.

Funding was provided by a combination of private and public sector support with additional support from civil society. In addition, WLN was expanded to include rural women, indigenous women and women with special needs in order to ensure that their special concerns and viewpoints were integrated. It was important to obtain the support of major private sector sponsors to prove to governments that the private sector took women seriously so the government and policy makers should as well. Funding was provided by:

- Manulife Financial
- Hodgson Ross Andrews Woods & Goodyear
- Canadian Airlines
- Royal Bank of Canada
- Business Development Bank of Canada
- Nortel
- Corel
- Trimark
- Women Entrepreneurs of Canada
- Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
- Department of Foreign Affairs Canada (DFAIT)
- Status of Women Canada
- Canada's Year of Asia Pacific
- UNIFEM
- North-South Institute

The form of the Declaration was 'From Action to Implementation' and was presented to the Canadian Minister for Industry Canada, the Honourable John Manley at a special lunch held on Parliament Hill in the very historic room where Canadian women were ruled to be 'persons' under the law of Canada and the same room where we presented the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Jean Chrétien with the conclusions of the Prime Minister's Task Force on Women Entrepreneurs in November, 2003. That WLN Declaration built on the 1996 Call to Action and focused on several overarching recommendations with specific attention to SME's, academia and science and technology. Full details of this and other statements and recommendations are available from Dana Peebles or myself and we really should keep them archived.

Since 1997, WLN meetings have been held in conjunction with each economy host as follows:

- 1998 – Malaysia
- 1999 – New Zealand
- 2000 – Brunei
- 2001 – China
- 2002 – Mexico
- 2003 – Thailand
- 2004 – Chile

Future host economies are:

- 2005 – Korea
- 2006 – Viet Nam
- 2007 – Australia
- 2008 – Peru

We are so fortunate to know who the next four host economies for APEC will be and we need to think in longer terms – it is vital that we get the women and future chairs of WLN for these four years engaged NOW. We need to go back to our original model which was taken from the APEC structure of the present Chair working closely with the immediate past and future chairs. And, if these women or economies are not represented here, then we still need to engage them fully and ensure that they are at the next WLN meeting. This will give us the continuity we require.

So how does WLN really work or how is it supposed to work and what makes it so unique? WLN is a loose network which is flexible and consists of a multi-sectoral approach to recommendations. The idea being that in order to facilitate change, we must all work together and interact and that the private sector and the public sector must work together in order to satisfy each other's needs in an equitable and efficient way with equal input from academia and civil society and that the unique view points of women with special needs or interests should be included in order to ensure a balanced perspective. Policy makers cannot work in isolation – they need our input.

In order for WLN to succeed there needs to be the highest level of commitment. Women participants have to be leaders in their sector and in their community – women who have access to decision makers and ‘spheres of influence’ and women who are willing to use their access in order to ensure that WLN and other women who do not have access are fairly represented within all APEC fora and in individual economies and now more and more in other international fora such as the WTO. There also needs to be a high level commitment within the government and with the host economy to support WLN and their meetings and their recommendations and not just lip service.

WLN is not just a photo opportunity to be used by APEC economies and should not be used as such. Therefore, it is necessary for the host economy, in particular, to work closely with its own APEC officials and to have representation at APEC and WLN meetings. It is also necessary to have representation from the APEC Secretariat in order to assist in the drafting of WLN statements and declarations. WLN participants are not expected to be experts on APEC, APEC protocol or certainly the unique language of APEC policy so it is essential that there is participation from the APEC Secretariat and other officials to ensure that the WLN statements and recommendations are within the mandate of the Ministers they are directed to and written in the language of APEC and consistent with other APEC documents. The language of APEC is not the same as that used at other international fora such as the United Nations.

And, finally, there needs to be the consistent commitment and involvement from WLN participants. WLN is not a one time a year event or conference. It is a living, breathing network that comes together once a year to review its progress and to make presentations to Ministers. However, that is only the smallest part of WLN’s role. In order to ensure the success of WLN and its recommendations, it is necessary for each WLN member to continue to interact with its own officials to ensure that recommendations and the work of WLN are not buried but are acted upon. Too often, WLN participants treat the annual meeting as a conference or a reunion but do nothing throughout the year to continue to promote and lobby for the recommendations submitted at its annual meeting or hold their own officials accountable for responding to the WLN recommendations. Even if all APEC economies do not take up our recommendations, we need to work to ensure that at least our own individual economies do.

Since 1996, WLN can be proud of its successes. It is easy for those not involved to criticize or to comment that WLN has been ineffective but that is not so. Just the fact that APEC is still the ONLY multi-lateral fora that has a women’s advisory group that has been able to meet once a year for nine years makes it a very unique entity and one that needs to be built upon. Some of our successes include:

- Launching!
- Awareness
- 9 years of meetings
- 2 Ministerial Meetings for Ministers Responsible for Women’s Affairs
- AGGI (Ad hoc Group on Gender Integration)
- Gender training
- Gender Focal Point Network

- Best practice recognition at the OECD, Commonwealth Secretariat and other international fora
- Access to Ministers
- Participation and Education of more than 2000 women in nine years
- Recognition of the 'unique contribution of indigenous women' for the first time in any trade document at the 1999 APEC Trade Ministers in Auckland, New Zealand
- Other fora

But WLN has not been without its failure as well. WLN has lost many of its very high powered women leaders from the early days. In addition, it:

- Has not grown
- Credibility is in doubt by some fora
- No consistency
- Losing women of highest influence
- Lack of coordination and continuity
- No central archive, website or secretariat
- No funding
- Stagnant government cooperation

The vision of the original founders of WLN was to create a network of women of influence and leaders willing to use their position to influence both domestic and APEC policy makers. Yes, it was elitist but we recognized that in order to help women who could not speak for themselves then we had to aim for women at the highest levels who already had a voice to speak for other women. It was always intended to be a loose network that can adjust and 'morph' as its needs and focus change rather than a formal NGO. The vision included women working at the highest levels in order to ensure success and that the women who can not speak for themselves or do not have access to decision makers will not be forgotten and will be spoken for.

WLN is not an annual conference. It is a network that comes together on an annual basis to develop recommendations for APEC Leaders and Ministers. It is a network which must continue to work together throughout the year and maintain the momentum and goodwill created at its annual meeting. WLN meetings should not be stand alone but rather build on the previous meetings and need to be consistent with the themes and topics identified by the Ministers and Leaders for each particular year. WLN needs to 'raise' its level of activity and broaden its perspective to include even the most sophisticated issues that other APEC fora are grappling with, such as world trade, international security, regional free trade agreements, the service sector and movement of people and goods.

It still is not an official part of APEC but rather exists outside of APEC and meets at the invitation of the host economy. This was done intentionally because to be an official part of APEC, WLN would have to comply with certain rather strict issues of protocol. Existing outside of APEC's formal structure has been both a positive and a negative

factor. It is vital that we retain our independence and not allow ourselves to be used as a tool by any government or group for private or political agendas. By not being official, we are not bound by the APEC constrictions. However, it does make funding and other recognition issues more difficult especially outside of APEC.

After nine years of successful meetings, we can make a good case to establish a permanent secretariat, within the APEC secretariat in Singapore, to ensure the growth and development of WLN. No other group that meets within APEC exists without the help of the APEC Secretariat so why shouldn't we now have the luxury of that support. Any past chairs and organizing committees of WLN and indeed our gracious hosts for this year can testify to the huge challenges they have had to face and overcome to pull off a successful meeting, but they have all done it.

WLN would not exist today without those people who had the vision to make WLN happen in the early days:

- President Ramos
- Dr. Amelia Ancog
- Dr. Elena Lim
- Dr. Ernesto Ordonez
- Tessum Castillo
- Rosanita Serrano
- Zenaida Gordon
- Lilia Ramos
- Imelda Nichols
- Dr. Elizabeth McGregor
- Susan Davies
- Adair Huechan
- Nancy Spence
- Ibu Sjamsiah Achmad

Looking forward to the future of WLN, I looked through the brochures and photographs of those early years and, honestly, tears came to my eyes as I remembered the friendships, the fun, the frustrations that we have endured over the years. At times I have been frustrated at the slow rate that WLN has moved forward and at the lack of momentum that has taken over. However, I also think of what a wonderful opportunity we have to make an impact and that we must use it wisely.

I now spend most of my time living and working in one of the most violent and unstable regions in the world – Central Asia and the Caucasus, a region where women are more and more becoming suicide bombers and involved in terrorism. I cannot help but wonder how desperate their lives must be to resort to such extreme measures as to blow themselves up and now to murder children.

We live in very troubled times that are of concern to all of us. I truly do believe that now more than ever it is vital for women to be involved. When times are good, it is easy for

us to overlook women and become complacent, but when times are not good, women and the gains they have made become even more vulnerable than ever. Look at the conflict areas in the world and look who is suffering the most. By claiming our access to government, setting examples within APEC for other fora and using our influence wisely and by women from the very different 21 APEC economies coming together at least once a year, I truly believe that we can understand each other better and make a valuable contribution towards increasing stability in the world and making it better for other women and young women everywhere, but we have to act now. Thank you.