

# SMEs as Global Traders

by

Diana Abruzzi

Focal Point - Australia

## Introduction

APEC has recognized the important historical contribution of businesswomen to the growth and development of the region. And the benefit we can gain from its objectives of trade and investment liberalization. Studies are showing, where there are more women in business, innovation is higher and, as a result, economic prosperity is greater.

Therefore, I believe, as a key driving force contribution to national and regional prosperity, the role of Women in Business needs to become more central to the APEC Action Plan.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) over the last twenty years have been seen to take on a more prominent role in the global economy. Not to mention the phenomenal growth of women-owned and -operated businesses in the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

SMEs owned by women have contributed significantly not only to GDP growth, but also to higher employment figures and contributing to regional exports by 35%. Due to their nimble size SMEs are also proving to be critical engines of entrepreneurship and vitality in the region. The ability to be flexible enables them to respond quickly to innovation change, and the demanding nature of diverse consumer needs.

These qualities and dividends make building a strong SME sector of businesswomen of central importance to the dynamism of the Asia-Pacific in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Central Issues

The central issues of concern to SME businesswomen for further growth and opportunity are quite broad, but are all inter-connected, and some are inseparable.

### 1. Technology

Innovation and change always has an impact on the psychology of people. In the world we find ourselves living in today, this impact is stronger and more far-reaching than any of us will ever understand. But change and progress is not bad, it's just new. And people are always afraid of the unknown. Giant leaps in information technology has

enabled people, whether male or female, working or not, to access and communicate far more efficiently than ever before.

This opportunity must be embraced fully by women in the APEC economies. However, the barriers are different between developed to developing nations. So, if we hope to make progress as an economies block, we must standardize opportunities across the region. To do this we need to look at the other key issues of institutions, education, and finance.

## 2. Institutions

Greater understanding and support from private and public organizations to the unique needs of women in business is urgent and paramount. For such to be effective, we need to first see the attitudes of the predominantly male dominated institutions be renewed. Because shameful attitudes from insecure males are the barrier to opportunity and justice for all gender. I use the word 'renewed' specifically because it captures in its tone the healing required in this rebuilding process. The word 'shameful' speaks for it self.

To assist this renewal process of fair laws and just policy, women must be invited to share in their definition and recreation. Therefore, today I appeal to the decision-making bodies of APEC, that all laws or policies that relate to, or affect women, be reviewed by women, written with women and governed through women.

## 3. Education

The ability to learn a trade or profession, supported by basic or advanced business skills and management training, are the key to sustainable economic progress, whether it be for women or men. To have basic education requires the full support of a Nations Institutions. Most of our economies are coming to grips with this, although some more than others.

However, advanced education requires money, a great deal of money in most economies. This is wrong, I say let our talents speak for themselves and let our abilities, not our wallets, negotiate our own destinies.

It's time we gave the 'unfortunate' people the world a chance at education. I am not suggesting that education alone is the key to a person's success. Because history has shown that only perseverance is the right ingredient for this. But education does give us knowledge and knowledge gives us confidence to make decisions and take calculated risks, not just risks.

Women do need this type of empowerment, and in some economies more so than men, to free them from their circumstances.

Therefore, I appeal to the APEC body to raise a standard of equality and opportunity for accessible education to all women despite circumstance or prejudices.

#### 4. Religion

Cultural barriers and ethnic stigmas are, in most cases, the root origin of many social actions or, in some cases, inaction. It is my belief that a person's faith should not override another persons' humanity. Yet it happens daily.

We did not choose to be born, but we can choose what we believe in. Therefore, despite which country we find ourselves in, we must respect the individual as a human being first. And allow them their God-given birth right, to the opportunities of dignity and respect. In some cases this also means first even recognizing women as human beings.

APEC must take the position that we all need to respect individual faiths, while not overriding the respect of the individual as an individual first.

#### 5. Money

Access to venture capital and development finance is a challenge to men and women. However, the facts are becoming clear that the established financial institutions do not really understand, or appreciate, the financial needs and differences of women when it comes to money and business. Research is showing that women are a far safer financial investment than men, and also a more significant contributor to innovation and national economic development than men.

Therefore, by not acknowledging and realigning to these needs we are holding back each of our economies' full potential and suppressing our greatest natural resources - people.

The time has come for greater finances to females! Made available, how they need it, and for why they need it.

### WLN Role

Within every economy there still lies dormant enormous potential of untapped businesswomen that could and would be international traders. If only certain "social values" were lifted and our traditional institutions renewed, their thinking, opened their doors and encouraged women.

A land mark decision was made last year in Wellington. It was passed and agreed upon by all APEC Ministers the "Frame Work for the Integration of Women into APEC" One of the key issues raised at meeting which is relevant to the topic we are covering today, was more effort should be directed to empower and increase the capacity building of women to respond to economic opportunities and challenges, and to eliminate barriers to women's full participation in the economy.

But we need to go even further, we need to be awarded an equal role next to ABAC. As a strategy, if we can achieve Status of an "Advisory Council" under the new

structure of the WLN or, at the negotiated expense of being an "Official Observer", we could more than adequately achieve our Objectives.

There must be a consistency in our vision, in all that we wish to achieve in reforming the minds of the current thinking in our economies. WLN is strategically positioned to facilitate these motions and start initiating progress. through political pressure, and commercial support, we can help equip and network cooperation within our spheres of influence.

We need to encourage and implement trade between our economies and keep the focus on women as Global Traders within the greater APEC mandate.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two final observations I would like to make regarding the comments I have made today. Firstly, I mentioned at the beginning that not one of these areas could be dealt with in isolation, for they are closely intertwined and, therefore, should be approached holistically.

Secondly, I also recognized that even if we achieved all that we hope for (that would constitute a miracle in itself), it still does not master the motivation of the individual women we hope to represent. For, as the old saying goes, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink". Our job is to help create a framework for just opportunity and a framework only.

It is our equal individual responsibility to do the work. Attitude of persistence and determination are the strongest characteristics we can have as women, to overcome any obstacle in our lives.

Women who believe in themselves sufficiently will fight for their ideas and inventions. They will push the solutions even in the face of obstacles.

Also a strong will is the best companion to talent. But it must be linked with basic common sense, coupled with determination and the confidence to dare.

This education can not bring money can not buy, and all the Government handouts in the world can not produce.

This type of good currency begins when we are young and, therefore, is the domain of parents to govern, mothers and fathers together, and not institutions where possible.

This is where the battle line begins.

Thank you.