

The Role of the Women Leaders Network and a Vision to Meet New Challenges

By

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SLIDE 1

Honourable Minister, colleagues, all friends, old and new. Buenas Dias! Thank you for this opportunity to be part of the opening of the 13th meeting of the APEC Women Leaders Network meeting here in beautiful Arequipa. And, thank you to Carmen and Olga and Mayela and the many, many people who have worked so hard to bring us all together to participate in this very important series of meetings. It has been no small task! And I am thrilled that this first session after the opening is entitled ‘Assuming a New Commitment’. I can think of no better way to launch the 13th meeting.

So, for you who have heard me speak before about the WLN, you can take a big sigh of relief because I am not going to review our history and genesis today. I want to look to the future and a vision to meet new challenges. But FIRST! A brief introduction for the benefit of those who have not attended a WLN meeting before.

SLIDE 2

What is WLN? In 1996 The Senior Women Leaders Network of APEC was originally conceived by a small group of women leaders in Technology who wanted:

- to ensure that women in technology in the APEC region were included in APEC activities,
- to encourage young women to study science and technology,
- to offer themselves to APEC officials as experts in their fields, and
- to provide a way for women to have an impact on policies that have an affect upon them and their lives.

Recognizing the full potential of such a network, the concept quickly grew to include senior women from other sectors such as the private sector, the public sector, academia and civil society, so that in September 1996, the Senior Women Leaders Network of APEC was launched in Manila, in the Republic of the Philippines. The Network had support from the highest levels of the Philippine and Canadian governments. We were called the Senior Women Leaders in an attempt to reflect the APEC language of Senior Officials. However, we soon dropped the Senior as it made us seem more senior in years than we wanted to be!

Our Call to Action from 1996 states that WLN was launched to offer a network that is:

- Dynamic and flexible
- Provides a pool of senior experts from diverse sectors with the ability to undertake gender analysis
- Is a source of participants and partners for the APEC structures and processes
- Offers a source of mentoring and role modeling

- Serves as a consultative forum and advisory body
- Acts as a catalyst for building strategic alliances and business matching, facilitating employment and promoting access to potential venture capital and alternative funding to women-led businesses

In other words we are leaders in our communities and in our sectors and we are agents of change. We have expanded that original definition to include indigenous and rural women and in 1999 were successful in our recommendation that the APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade ‘recognize the unique contribution of indigenous women in the Asia Pacific Region’. We are women who are committed to speaking for those women who are not here and cannot speak for themselves. Everyone in this room is a woman leader. And we are agents of change because together we can make a difference.

SLIDE 3

Since 1996, WLN has met every year and every year we have presented our recommendations to various APEC Ministerial meetings: Ministers Responsible for Small and Medium Enterprises, Ministers Responsible for Trade and Ministers Responsible for Women as well as to other APEC for a such as the committee on trade and investment, the sme working group, the electronic commerce working group, the human resources working group and the Gender Focal Point Network. We have been responsible for the creation of the task force which resulted in the gender focal point network, both Ministerial meetings for women, the creation of the micro enterprise sub working group among other significant initiatives within APEC. More than 5,000 women have attended and while we are not an ‘official’ part of APEC, we

are recognized and listened to and no host economy has refused to convene a WLN meeting. And, finally, this year, we have our own website, www.apecwln.org thanks to the tireless efforts of Grace Chu and the beginnings of our own permanent secretariat thanks to the collaboration of many WLN members and the generous offer of our Filipina colleagues. You shall hear much more about these exciting developments over the next few days, but I mention them here because you can find the detailed history of WLN and copies of all of our recommendations since 1996 on the website as well as copies of various previous proceedings. All of this leads us to where we are today and why I want to speak about the future – the new challenges.

Since our launch in 1996 the dynamics of the Asia Pacific region have changed. Indeed, Peru was not even a member of APEC at that time! We have seen the rise of the economic power of China, natural disasters such as the tsunami and the devastating earthquakes such as the one that occurred this past year in Peru, health scares such as SARS, bird flu, foot and mouth and pig disease, an increase in political unrest worldwide, wars, the economic uncertainty and volatility of the United States dollar and the effect this has had on the rest of the world. Most recently we have witnessed the rise of religious idealism, concerns about the environment, the dramatic increase in the cost of energy and as we meet here today, a crisis about food shortages. All of which is to say that this does not seem to paint a very pretty picture! But, honestly, I really am every hopeful. My point is that all of these issues affect each and every one of us even when we do not think they do. No matter how remote a community is, globalization and international trade, telecommunications and access to international travel have truly made us interdependent. And that's why the new dynamics affect us all. No one lives in isolation and through WLN

we have created a network that can make a difference and can be activated to reach out, especially now that we shall have our own secretariat.

Which brings me to why I believe our relevance has increased. It is now well recognized that economies that have a high percentage of women active in the economy have a higher standard of living. Economies that have a high percentage of small businesses are more successful economies and economies that have a high degree of transparency and low corruption have a higher percentage of women in economic activity. The World Bank Doing Business 2008 report recognizes that ‘higher rankings on the ease of doing business indicators are associated with more growth, more jobs and a smaller share of the economy in the informal sector...and that the benefits are particularly large for women.’ You shall hear more about this report from Amanda Ellis and why we must all support the research involved and how WLN can use the information from the report to help us move forward.

As the Economist stated in the April 12th 2006 issue, ‘Forget China, India and the internet: economic growth is driven by women’. I know that comment has been quoted over and over and I believe it should be until everyone eats, sleeps and dreams this mantra. 40% of the world’s measurable global economy is the result of women’s work and over 50% of the informal unmeasured economy is in the hands of women. We also know that GNP growth rates are higher in countries that invest in higher education for girls and accelerated GNP growth can be correlated directly to girls’ education. Economic gains linked to higher education of women are greater than those resulting from educating men. Women are the major consumer force in the world with women in

the developing world driving the economy by accounting for over 80% of consumption.

Women are a better credit risk and reimburse microfinance loans at nearly 100%. Women are starting more companies than men but these companies are not growing as fast due to structural and attitudinal impediments. This is not a session or a forum for bashing men – we love men and most women I know love men – it is not us against them, but it is us taking our rightful place at the table and together, hand in hand, building a better world. WLN is a forum for stating the facts and acting on them. And that is why the relevance of WLN has increased. We are the only network of women leaders in the world that meets annually and has input into a large multilateral cooperation which includes members with the largest economies in the world and the fastest growing economic region in the world. And our voices, perspectives, experience and expertise count.

SLIDE 4

I would like to recommend that we focus on three pillars to build upon and that we consider these going forward. These include the Digital Economy for Women Forum (or DEW); our guidelines to assist women in microenterprise development and export; and a model for success.

Firstly, many of you may have attended the Digital Economy for Women forum organized by Dr. Kio Chung Kim and Dr. Yong Ja Kim of Sookmyung University in Seoul. Four years ago a mere dream but today as a result of their vision, drive, and tenacity one of the most highly successful offspring of WLN to ensure that women and young women are part of the new technology. We

must continue to participate in this very important forum and ensure that the training that they have developed and the network that they are creating continues to grow. We must remain linked in and we must use this technology and network to help each other and as a means of development.

Secondly, many of you may have attended the Women in Export Trade day and listened to the opportunities and the importance of export for women and that you are never too small to export. This is another successful offspring of WLN. And tied to this has been the development of guidelines to assist in the development of successful micro enterprises, particularly for rural and isolated women. You will hear more about this initiative during WLN, particularly from Francine Whiteduck. Much of what APEC does is talk and promote best practices and good practices – all of which are very important, but after 12 years of WLN and this incredible network that we have built upon, we want to stop talking about how to do things and start actually doing them and doing them through this dynamic and flexible network we have created. We want to connect the traders of WLN to do business and that means all of you.

And, finally, let us follow success! WLN is what you make it. You can come and make new friends and have a great time and that is okay – many have - or you can chose to make WLN work for you. Four years ago, in 2004, Chile hosted WLN in La Serena. It was a new and unknown experience and no one in La Serena or Coquimbo really knew what to expect. But the women of La Serena and Coquimbo chose not to let WLN die. They formed the first women leaders association in the region and have attended every WLN meeting since then. Not everyone can come every time but that does not matter – the unbroken link is what matters. Our

Chilean friends have continued to work with their local and federal officials to continue support for women in their region, they have created a foundation to provide micro loans and they have created an association to mentor single mums to develop their own micro enterprise, and they recently, they even met with their President who has pledged support. And now, they are talking about a memorandum of cooperation within WLN, a website for their products and a catalogue for their region. They chose not to let the dream die, but rather to learn and make a difference. And, for some, it changed their lives. If you are up for it, WLN can change your life too.

SLIDE 5

So, what needs to be done. WLN is not just a conference. Over the next few days, we'll meet and we'll listen to many international and Peruvian experts. We'll get tired, drink pisco sours – some more than others – we'll make new friends and dance at our dinner. But it is also a working forum where we must develop recommendations and agree by consensus and these recommendations shall be presented to various APEC fora. So what we all need to do, is to ensure that we identify the various points of intervention in APEC and in our own economies and work with our own officials to include the women's perspective in their priorities. We need to present our officials with creative and practical solutions. And, we need to ensure that we engage our young women throughout the process and going forward.

SLIDE 6

And finally, remember that everyone of you can make a difference – become and remain committed – believe me, it only takes a few.

You can ensure that our recommendations to the APEC ministers and other officials are practical, focussed, relevant and actionable and that you continue once you return to every day life that you pressure your government officials to listen to our recommendations. And, you can stay in touch, register on www.apecwln.org, follow up and make a commitment not to let the vision die.

SLIDE 7

I am proud of the work and history of the WLN and the impact that it has had on women and APEC. But believe me, there is much left to be done. So, let's work hard and play hard and some of us shall shop hard and many have come to see this beautiful and magical country of Peru. Thank you once again to our Peruvian hosts and to all of you. I wish all of us a most successful and fruitful meeting – muchas gracias!