

## **“WHY ENGAGE IN WLN? BECAUSE ONE WOMAN CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE”**

The Hon Justice Annabelle Bennett AO

I am not in Government. I am not in private enterprise. I am a Judge, having been a practicing lawyer in the private profession and I am the Pro-Chancellor of the Australian National University. I have been involved in many public sector and non-for-profit institutions. It goes without saying that I am a woman.

I do not have access to statistics and internal government reporting, so that what I have to say is from the perspective of a woman who has had her awareness enhanced by participation in WLN through APEC. It is fair to say that before I went to WLN, I thought that I was happy and successful and that it was not for me to worry too much, in my economy, about women's networks that reach to every level of society and APEC economy. I am a member and past president of Chief Executive Women, which has as its focus the promotion of the next generation of women leaders but, while that is of crucial importance, it is not enough.

All over the world, leaders in government and in business mouth platitudes. They commission and cite report after report, cite learned article after learned article to say, with some surprise, that women and women led enterprises are important to the economy. You do not have to be a rocket scientist to appreciate that harnessing half of the population's intellectual skills has to be a good idea. You do not need government reports to know that women are disadvantaged in the business world, not least because of lack of training, lack of mentors and networks and lack of access to technology and credit. You do not need to be an economist to know that business practices that benefit women can also benefit the business' bottom line. That is not even to mention specific disabilities in specific economies and cultures.

WLN presents an opportunity to:

- Engage with women
- Make them aware of the need for action
- Discuss the most appropriate ways to further women's access to and participation in economic activity and advancement

- Make them appreciate the power that they have
- Inspire them to exercise the political, social and economic power to drive equal (at least) participation

Every woman I know who has been to an APEC WLN meeting has come away better educated in the problems and the avenues for change. Every woman has come away determined to do something in her own economy. Yet, another year goes by and little is accomplished. The same recommendations are made at the next meeting: the words are slightly different but the substance is the same, reflecting the total absence of implementation of those recommendations, some of which have been in place for years. Every year, the relevant Ministers make general, non-committing, statements of support. Our recommendations are “noted” and even “welcomed”. Yet another year passes and we are still considered a minority and a disadvantaged group in our own economies. Governments can, of course, point to programs that can be said to be directed to the advancement of women or that benefit women but it clearly isn’t enough. Some governments are, of course, better at it than others and it would be good, if idealistic, if we believed that good programs established in one APEC economy would be followed in each other economy. APEC has the capacity to influence structural change in its member economies. Some work is being done to simplify the regulation of SMEs and micro business. This is a beginning in strengthening the capacity of women to run businesses.

My own government has put in place some programs and policies which are said to be directed to promote programs and policies that support women’s greater contribution to the economy. They range from pointing out how general policies are also good for women, how there are policies to provide for improved gender pay parity, to extend unpaid parental leave for parents and to promote “work/life balance” which, does not, only matter for women. Recognition from Government and business can help by promoting and publicising awards and scholarships directed to women. One award is for women in the rural economy which recognises that women in primary industries contribute almost half of the total economic output that might be attributed to farming families, valued at 23.6 billion dollars. Another is the Veuve Clicquot Business Woman Award that recognises entrepreneurship and social responsibilities.

The Australian and NSW Governments also operate a number of initiatives which are directed to facilitating women's access to resources, employment, markets and trade. Australia is also committed to a program to improve Pacific women's economic participation and the business environment. It cannot be said, however, that these developments have necessarily arisen because of WLN recommendations. Certainly I can see nothing to suggest that the Government says so. If they are, governments should make it clear because that will, in turn, strengthen WLN and APEC.

Are we a group to be pitied? Are we a group that waits around for the men to deign to do something to help us and to advance our cause and our place in the economic arena? Why don't we do something ourselves? We have at least 50% of the vote; we have much greater than 50% of the buying power. We are just not organised or inspired to exercise that power in our own cause. Just think of what we could achieve! We are, of course, entitled to equal rights. This is not only the right to be educated and to do equal work for equal pay; it is also the right to access opportunities and to obtain financing to do so.

WLN can reach out across each layer of society and business activity. It can be the means whereby we bring about change. The women of each economy can be secure in the knowledge that their sisters in other APEC economies are doing the same thing: the message will be clear and it will not be able to be ignored. This requires effort – effort to reach as many women as possible and effort to get women of diverse interests and backgrounds to join together in common cause.

If each woman comes to the WLN meeting with the thought in place that she must think how to implement the ideas and the individual recommendations, there could be a session at the end of the meeting where those strategies are discussed and adopted as part of the WLN recommendations. One of those recommendations would have to address positive actions to be taken by the women of each economy. It is not sufficient to call upon Governments to do all of our work for us. It would, however, be a start if each economy could ensure that relevant Ministers were present at WLN: Ministers for Education, Business, Industry and Trade.

We must elevate WLN to a true, relevant force for the whole economy – not just a female networking event.

It won't be easy but we have to make a start. That integrated start can be here in Tokyo. Just remember, the theme from WLN Australia: One Woman Can.