

3 August 2021

Hon. Jan Tinetti

Chair, APEC Women & the Economy Forum
Minister for Women
New Zealand

Dear Minister,

We, the members of the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC), are pleased to share with you our recommendations for the empowerment of women. The need has never been greater: these COVID times have impacted women disproportionately at every level – and that is an especially dismal reality when set against the backdrop of the gender divide that already existed. Our ABAC theme for 2021 of “People, Place and Prosperity”, or *Tāngata, Taiao me te Taurikura* – stresses that the needs and interests of our people must be at the heart of everything we do. Enabling and empowering women is a central part of that commitment.

This is an urgent task. Prior to the pandemic, it was estimated that improved gender equality had the potential to add \$13 trillion to global GDP by 2030. As we turn to post-COVID economic recovery and the implementation of APEC’s Putrajaya Vision 2040, APEC economies will need to tackle a range of key challenges – including around creating equality of opportunity, building skills to take advantage of those opportunities, and enabling greater participation by women in economic activity – and this will be most effectively done in partnership with the private sector.

The first priority is the urgent need to strengthen existing support mechanisms that will help women navigate in the post-COVID world, where working from home is likely to remain a reality for many, and for others on the front lines of in-person work, facing ongoing disruption to institutional and support structures including in-person schooling and childcare. The “new normal” dynamics come with novel challenges and should encourage us to step up the existing instruments available for women both from the corporate and policy perspectives. Facilitating women’s full engagement in the workforce and providing support structures that address increased family responsibilities (including those linked to remote schooling of children), financial stress and domestic abuse will be critical to creating a more enabling baseline for future improvements.

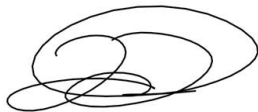
Second, we need to ensure that women can participate fully in the digital economy. COVID has accelerated the digitalization of businesses and of the broader economy, including significant expansion of e-commerce and digital trade, as well as e-government services. Women-led businesses and women workers will need new skills and capabilities to find success in this new digital landscape – particularly given that both formal and informal employment, and the sectors where women predominate, especially services sectors, have been hard hit by COVID disruptions. Targeted digital training that is accessible and fit-for-purpose will help create new opportunities for women; alternatively, without upgrading women’s digital skills and literacy, we risk exacerbating the gender digital divide that already exists, thereby leaving women even further behind.

Finally, we want to take this opportunity to stress once again the pressing need for profound structural reform that facilitates gender inclusion. The implementation of *La Serena Roadmap* is an important opportunity for empowering women through access to capital and markets, increasing labor force participation (including through removing structural biases in employment opportunities), improving women's access to leadership in the public and private sectors, supporting STEM education as well as other forms of education and professional development. We need to apply a gender lens to promote greater workplace success and proceed with strong evidence-based policymaking through improvements in systematic data collection and gender-based analysis. Addressing these elements must remain a high priority in every APEC economy.

The challenges do not rest with policymakers alone. Public-private collaboration will also be key to making meaningful and lasting change in all of the areas above – and ABAC stands ready and eager to play its part. Although women have lost ground due to COVID-19, we are confident that a collective commitment to the actions above will help us to regain those losses and move forward more powerfully to the full realization of the economic potential and wellbeing of women, consistent not only with our ABAC 2021 theme but also the pledge of all APEC economies in the Putrajaya Vision.

Our more detailed recommendations are contained in the Annex. We look forward to further discussing these with you in September.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and curves, positioned above the printed name.

Rachel Taulelei
ABAC Chair 2021

ABAC recommendations for enhanced gender inclusion

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year have set back the performance of the APEC region in terms of gender equality. Women all around the world have been affected disproportionately by this global crisis. This has increased many of the barriers and obstacles they had previously faced such as lower salaries, lack of opportunities in the formal sector and less participation in decision making; indeed, within the APEC region, less than half of the member economies have even the most basic legislation against gender discrimination. Enhancing gender equality is not only the “right” thing to do: it also offers tremendous economic potential. Given our collective focus on economic recovery, addressing gender issues is now more important than ever.

Promote enhanced conditions for women’s economic development

The establishment of a more enabling environment for the continued growth of both businesses and individuals is fundamental to achieve sustainable economic and social advances. The construction of policies that allow women to participate more fully in business and trade, especially post-COVID, should be a priority. The pandemic has unveiled how uneven the playing field is for women, with social paradigms that make them responsible for the family care, provide them with lower remuneration than that of their male counterparts and normalize environments where they are vulnerable to discrimination and violence.

In our work this year, we have explored the range of challenges that women continue to face today, as well as the types of measures taken by the private sector to facilitate women’s participation in the economy. We have also identified that public support is critical for success, especially in terms of the provision of services such as affordable, quality, and easily available childcare; strong family leave policies, where both male and female workers are strongly supported and encouraged to utilize their leave; and training, re-training and education programs that are created with a gender lens. **We encourage APEC policymakers to prioritize the development of regulatory frameworks that facilitate innovative corporate and public policies for gender inclusion, including strengthening and better targeting existing support programs.**

Acknowledge Women as a key actor for economic recovery and prosperity

This year, APEC and ABAC have discussed the key strategies for post-COVID economic recovery, which include access to finance, health, education, and trade facilitation measures, among others. However, little is said about the central role that women are playing during the pandemic and that they will continue to have for achieving economic and social recovery. Women are key agents in both the economic and social growth of all the economies of the region. We emphasize the importance of policies that seek to achieve greater gender equality in all economic dimensions, from financial aid to retraining. **ABAC encourages APEC economies to keep gender equality at the center of policy making, acknowledging that we need the best of all our citizens to navigate through these challenging times.**

Promote Digital Inclusion for Women

Women have been heavily affected by COVID-19, but digital inequality has further exacerbated the impact. They have little resources in accessing digital knowledge and tools, particularly in the digital-lagging economies. **ABAC urges economies to redesign existing programs, and develop gender-responsive policies and programs of digital transformation to: (1) strengthen international cooperation in women’s education and mentorship; (2) promote**

digital capacity building for women; and (3) build up an APEC digital education online platform, ensuring women's access to sufficient and effective digital services and solutions.

Support Financial Inclusion for Women

Our work this year has illustrated that women face increasing barriers and limitations in access to financial resources. This acts as a chokepoint in the growth and development of women-led businesses. Increasing the Ease of Doing Business will enable and encourage more women working in the informal sector to formalize their business and therefore enable them to access more government business support systems and financial resources. **ABAC urges economies to remove any legal barriers that limit the access of women-led businesses to finance, and to seek to enable greater access to financial services.**

Structural reform and gender inclusion

APEC has begun to adopt structural reform measures to advance women's economic empowerment through the La Serena Roadmap on Women and Inclusive Growth and the work of the Economic Committee. These measures have taken on renewed importance as the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected women. In particular, APEC economies should provide targeted support to distressed sectors which employ a high proportion of women; to women facing increased domestic responsibilities; and to those exposed to financial stress and domestic abuse. **ABAC urges the accelerated implementation of the La Serena Roadmap across all sectors of the economy, and in particular to prioritize the La Serena Targets to (1) have in place laws, policies and regulations that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex in employment access, opportunities and conditions; and (2) have in place non-discrimination laws, policies and regulations that provide equal access to capital and credit for both sexes.**

Finally, ABAC recognizes that increasing women's visibility at the highest levels of the public and private sector will help to empower the 'pipeline' of women leaders. In addition, research over decades has shown that greater diversity in both the governance and management of business, and in the leadership of the public sector, leads to better decision-making. **ABAC calls on APEC economies to take active steps to increase the representation of women in leadership positions in both the public and private sectors.**
