

Interview with Renee Graham, Chairwoman of the APEC forum Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy

# APEC: Driving Innovation & Female Entrepreneurship

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

The contribution of women to revitalizing the economy today is key to enhancing its growth potential. Underutilization of women's abilities and talents will lead to a serious loss of human resources and hamper the competitiveness of industries. In particular, women are good at creating new businesses related to consumer products. International discussions have been encouraging female entrepreneurship, with the OECD and APEC providing notable venues. APEC, in particular, has a special forum focusing on empowering female entrepreneurship called the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy.

Renee Graham has been chief executive of the Ministry for Women, New Zealand, since June 2017. During her tenure as chief executive, the ministry has successfully gained agreement for an increased 50% target for women on public sector boards and an action plan to eliminate the gender pay gap in core public services. A key focus of the ministry's work program is to improve outcomes for wāhine Māori. She contributes to a number of public sector-wide steering groups and committees, including the Papa Pounamu board for Diversity and Inclusion and the Women in Public Sector Summit organizing committee. Prior to this appointment, she was policy director at the Ministry of Education.

In an interview granted to *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, she gives an insight into the role of APEC in encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship among member nations, the APEC women entrepreneurs' contribution to the economy in the pandemic, and her future targets.

(Interviewed on April 22, 2021)

## Mission & Role

**JS:** Could you please tell us a little bit about yourself and your mission and role?

**Graham:** My name is Renee Graham. I am secretary for women and chief executive at the Ministry for Women, New Zealand. We are a small government organization, and we work as the government's principal advisor on achieving better results for girls and women in New Zealand. We bring the voices, experiences, and priorities of different groups of New Zealand women to the government and other agencies regarding what to do on these issues. Our vision in New Zealand is that New Zealand is a great place to be a woman or girl, that wāhine Māori, our indigenous population, succeed as Māori, and that gender is not a barrier to well-being. That is our mission; that is what we aim for in New Zealand.

A lot of other countries do not have a Ministry for Women. But we have been around since 1985. We work alongside other agencies. For example, the education agency is responsible for improving the education outcomes for girls. We work with them on that. So that's



Renee Graham

kind of a broader system role and the role we play in New Zealand. That is my job in New Zealand.

My other role is to be the chair of one of the APEC forums, which is the Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE). I have been elected to the chair for two years. I have taken over from the Chilean chair. Nowadays we have to work on a virtual platform, and that is a big challenge for us.

The goal of PPWE is to advance the economic integration of women in the APEC region for the benefit of all members and to coordinate gender activities across other APEC working groups. There are 12 other working groups attached to APEC working on a range of things like human

resources, illegal trade, etc. PPWE focuses on gender and women's economic empowerment, and its other responsibility is to ensure that the other groups across APEC are supported to ensure that they too have a focus on enhancing outcomes for women. In PPWE, we work to address the five key pillars impacting women's economic empowerment. We focus on access to capital, access to market, skills and capacity building, women's leadership and agency, and innovation and technology.

One other key area that I am focussed on as the chair for PPWE this year and the next year is the implementation of last year's roadmap. That was the ninth roadmap named after the city we had PPWE in. We developed the roadmap in Chile. The roadmap sets out what we should be doing not only in PPWE but across the APEC economies in other workstreams – get some action within the economies and the other streams of work. We call it greater inclusive economic development and participation of women in the Asia-Pacific.

We have five key areas of action in this roadmap: empowering women through access to capital and markets, strengthening women's labor force participation, improving access of women to leadership positions in all levels of decision-making, supporting women's education, training and skills development and access in a changing world of work, and advancing women's economic empowerment through data collection and analysis. So that is my role at APEC – to ensure that economies are focusing on the implementation of the roadmap.

## **Enhancement of Women's Capabilities**

**JS: Nations are working hard to enhance the status of women. Women constitute a country's largest potential human resources. Even Japan is working hard in this area. Could you please let me know the background of New Zealand's project for enhancement of women's capabilities? What made New Zealand adopt a policy of enhancing women's capabilities at such an early stage of its development?**

**Graham:** I think it goes way back to the 1890s. New Zealand was the first country to grant women the right to vote. It happened in 1893. While we haven't always gotten it right, we have always been a little bit progressive.

It is about how organized we can get and what we want from gender equality. With the passage of time women have become more advanced in terms of gender equality; and in the last three or four years, in particular, both society's values and wants around gender equality and the political environment gave us a big opportunity to advance and get what women had been talking about during that time. So we took the opportunity and were able to drive in changes in New Zealand. But we still have a long way to go. We still have issues that face other economies, such as domestic violence and family violence. We still have a lot to do in those spaces. That's why we find instruments and mechanisms like APEC helpful, and what that means is that we can come together and share ideas, problems, and solutions and help each other out in those areas. I think one of the advantages of APEC is that we can do all that together. We live in different economies, but we all want to achieve the same results. So that means that we should have good discussions whenever we are together, really sharing our advice and problems during the APEC sessions.

## **Role of APEC in Encouraging Innovation & Entrepreneurship**

**JS: How do you assess the role of APEC in encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship so far?**

**Graham:** I'd like to hold off until about after June. What we are doing this year is that across APEC all members are going to let us know what they are doing in their particular workstream in order to support women. In June, I'll look at all the information, which would give us a good picture of the steps we are taking across member economies to empower the economic achievement of women. I am quite optimistic. And I'm really taking on board last year's roadmap – the goals that we have for women. I am taking on board what each of the workstreams is thinking about how they can achieve better outcomes for women through the work they are doing, which is really powerful. That means it's not just PPWE where they are working to improve the outcome for women but the whole of the APEC. After June, I'll find out what they are actually doing to get better outcomes for women. We do have other PPWE activities like the BEST Award. That is about sharing success stories of women in businesses. So the business side is quite encouraging as well. That's an example of the good work that is being done, and that's why I am quite optimistic about the future.

## **Pandemic: New Challenges & Opportunities**

**JS: In your country, the pandemic has been very well contained. But it continues to pose a major challenge to many other countries. Do you think the ongoing pandemic can offer us opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship?**

**Graham:** The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls not only in New Zealand but across the world. It does not affect all women equally. In New Zealand, there were a few disadvantaged groups before the arrival of Covid-19, and there are more disadvantaged groups now – after the pandemic broke out. From what we know from previous labor market shocks in New Zealand, some of those disadvantaged groups will take three to six years to get back to the level they were prior to the pandemic, which gives quite a challenge to do something about it now – help those, especially the women, who have been hit by Covid-19. There is a common purpose among APEC members that we should be doing something to respond to the current situation. We have a clear opportunity to collectively improve the situation for women and girls. The La Serena Roadmap is an important tool which sets high level benchmarks in this area that we are focusing on. We're taking stock shortly of what economies are doing and that will be an important assessment of where we're at,

**JS: As you said earlier, women are suffering due to**

the new employment situation, which seems to be increasing difficulties in New Zealand. In Japan, for example, non-permanent employees are mostly women, and hence their service or income is unstable. In many cases, they face the risk of being fired. In this regard, what kinds of policies are needed to help women in New Zealand overcome the challenges they face? Do you think your entrepreneurship program can help them in overcoming the difficulties they currently face?

**Graham:** There were women in the tourism sector who lost their jobs because there weren't any tourists in New Zealand. That is what generally happened in the country after the pandemic broke out. The response from the government was quite generic and women had access to the generic kind of support and tools that the government implemented. So, for instance, we had wage subsidies – that helps employers to keep people employed. If they had to take sick leave, the government must pay for that. The generic response has benefitted women. Nearly half of the wage subsidy was taken up by women. And then we had the job creation programs as well that women could benefit from. So the shown response from the government in particular was generic, and that seemed to work. I think that the response in New Zealand and in other countries may need to move into gender-responsive policies and processes – policies and approaches that are specifically needed for women. At least we should have a dialogue and discussion about it, as women's needs might be different from men's needs.

## Female Entrepreneurship in New Zealand

**JS:** What have you to say about female entrepreneurship in your country?

**Graham:** We have found that in New Zealand the number of entrepreneurs slightly increased over the last year or so. Women and men have capitalized on the availability of new ways of working and opportunities with the pandemic. You can now show a little bit of entrepreneurship here. We also found women taking more unpaid work in child care. Some of the women here have come out of the labor market completely, and there has been a rise in family violence.

During the Covid era, many women in New Zealand took a leap into entrepreneurship. Quite a few of them started their own businesses after a wave of pandemic-related redundancies. Around 5,000 new businesses were registered with the New Zealand Companies Office in 2020 – the only rise in the number of companies in New Zealand in the past five years. There has been a sharp rise in the number of businesses appearing online since the pandemic broke out, as consumers have made a conscious effort to support local products. Covid-19 caused 10,000 women redundancies, and that is reflected in the number of women-led new businesses.

## Popular Sectors for Female Entrepreneurship

**JS:** In Japan, IT business or digital business seems to be quite popular in the area of entrepreneurship. What are the popular sectors for female entrepreneurship in New Zealand?

**Graham:** I think digital businesses are becoming quite popular here. In this connection, I would like to make special mention of some of the successful Pacific women in business. Manukau-based chartered accountant Ruth Sio-Lokam believes that it wasn't until she went into business for herself that she felt able to express the core Pacific values in her professional life. Kristy Morgan is a barrister, mother of three, and director of the Pacific dance company *Embrace*. Inspiration for going into business came early for tech company founder and director Falute Lene, who grew up in Samoa. A desire to be able to work from home and care for her two children led Fijian-born Renuka Kumar to start a successful Pacific clothing business. And New Zealand-born Sao Timaloa is a successful family lawyer. This is a report on Pacific women in business in New Zealand; there are case studies on pages 12-16: [https://women.govt.nz/sites/public\\_files/Pacific%20Women%20and%20Men%20in%20Business.pdf](https://women.govt.nz/sites/public_files/Pacific%20Women%20and%20Men%20in%20Business.pdf).

## Contribution to APEC in the Near Future

**JS:** As the new chair of the group, what do you think will be your group's contribution to APEC in the near future assuming that the pandemic will continue for a while?

**Graham:** All APEC members recognize the potential of women's contribution across the Asia-Pacific, and that potential remains untapped. Women's empowerment is quite high on APEC's agenda, and it is likely to remain there for some time. I think we have capitalized on some of the instruments that we have, such as last year's roadmap. I also think that having a workstream like PPWE, which is focussed on women, means that you will always have a focus on women-related issues and that you can make sure that women are not overtaken. And that's more important in a pandemic or post-pandemic environment. By using the roadmap, we can monitor what is really going on and use that as evidence to bring women to the forefront and to tell people about how women are faring across the Asia-Pacific.

**JS**

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