

**Rt Hon Helen Clark.**

**“Embracing women’s leadership and participation”: Keynote speech at Asian Financial Forum 2023.**

**Hong Kong, 1.10 pm, Thursday 12 January.**

**Good afternoon to all, and many thanks to the Asian Financial Forum for inviting me to be the keynote speaker at this luncheon.**

**Today, I want to discuss why embracing the inclusion of women matters. It matters across economies and societies, and it matters in political decision-making too as I can attest from a political career spanning decades.**

**Gender equality matters for two key reasons – it’s both the right thing to do, and it’s the smart thing to do.**

**It’s the right thing because equality between women and men has been recognised as a fundamental human right, as agreed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948.**

**But it’s also the smart thing to do because full gender equality not only enables women to reach their full potential, but also enables**

**whole countries to reach their full potential because they are drawing on all the talents. The same principle applies to individual companies and organisations.**

**As a whole, our world is not doing so well on moving towards gender equality. Every year the World Economic Forum issues a Global Gender Gap Report. The report issued in [2020](#), but drawing on data from before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, estimated that it would take 100 years to close the overall gender gap measured across the four dimensions of economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment and health and survival.**

**Then in [2021](#), the Report measured what it described as a “generational loss” of progress with the gap blowing out to 136 years. This related to both the direct and indirect impacts of the pandemic –for example, on the loss of ongoing access to education for girls. UNESCO estimated that [eleven million girls](#) may never return to school after the lockdowns of 2020 and beyond. As well, a higher proportion of women than of men lost jobs in 2020 because of their greater concentration in the [hospitality, retail,](#) and personal care sectors. More women also left the workforce because of an increase in the burden of unpaid work as education facilities and other services closed.**

The 2022 [Global Gender Gap Report](#) shows a small improvement from 136 to 132 years to overcome the overall gender gap, but, clearly, we are nowhere near back to where we were before the pandemic struck. The figure for East Asia and the Pacific is currently estimated at 168 years.

On the brighter side, for economic participation and opportunity, East Asia and the Pacific rank second among the eight regions with 72 per cent of the gender gap closed, second only to North America. There are, however, wide differences between countries in the region: Japan ranks lowest at 56.4 percent, while Thailand and Philippines are close to eighty per cent.

On other dimensions: 95.4 per cent of the gender gap in educational attainment and 95.2 per cent of the health and survival gap are closed in East Asia and the Pacific. Where the region performs very poorly is on political empowerment where the gender gap is only 13.3 per cent closed – the second lowest in the world after Central Asia.

Overall, I would be so bold as to say that the prospects for achieving full gender equality in East Asia and the Pacific on the

economic dimension are positive in the longer term, but that the pace needs to be stepped up with greater buy in from governments and company leaders. Governments need to implement more conducive policies, and company leaders need to make it clear that they see gender equality as a priority for their business and will act to achieve it.

[McKinsey](#) estimated three years ago that 40 to 45 per cent of entry-level positions in companies globally were occupied by women. It is probably fair to assume that roughly the same applies to the finance sector. The problem lies with what happens to that 40-45 per cent as their careers progress – or don't progress.

[Deloitte's Global Report on](#) *“Advancing more women leaders in financial services”* found that in Asia only 15.9 per cent of C-Suite positions were held by women, 18.5 per cent of senior leader positions below that, and 23.8 per cent of next generation positions at manager level below senior levels.

To retain more women recruits so that they have equal prospects with male recruits of climbing all the way to the most senior levels of the sector requires companies making that a top priority, and setting targets and KPIs against which to measure progress.

**Company policies would need to change, to embrace – among other things:**

- **flexible working hours, capacity for online working where feasible, and support for paid parental leave and childcare – especially where public provision is poor.**
- **Promotion policies need to ensure that there are always women on shortlists for interview and that women are on selection panels.**
- **As well, panels should not be asking women applicants questions which they would not ask of men, such as whether they plan to have children – unfortunately this still often happens.**
- **Many women refer to the value of peer support groups, mentoring, and having sponsors in an organisation who will back them.**

**Overall, workplace culture needs to be supportive of women – conscious, and unconscious bias needs to be addressed and removed. A 2017 [leanIn.Org/ McKinsey study](#) suggests that women are as ambitious as men, and as likely to apply for promotion, but are 18 per cent less likely to be promoted into management than male counterparts. Discriminatory practice leading to this outcome has to be overcome by employing measures such as I have discussed here.**

**I speak as one who entered the New Zealand Parliament four decades ago when only 8.7 per cent of the Members were female. It was a lonely place for women– and there were very few female role models in political systems globally from whom to draw inspiration. It’s hard to be what you can’t see.**

**Now, New Zealand has a gender equal Parliament. The same results can be achieved elsewhere and in other sectors, but it requires a number of things to change. In the case of New Zealand, changing the electoral system to a proportional one was hugely beneficial for women candidates. Then, the more women Members of Parliament there more, the more critical mass they had to influence policy and decisions and advance into more senior positions. New Zealand has had women Prime Ministers for 16 of the past 25 years.**

**A number of countries now are legislating or regulating around gender inclusion in the public and private sectors – either by requiring quotas for boards and or senior leadership, and/or by requiring transparency on gender diversity with disclosure on the composition of boards and senior management and on policies to boost women’s representation at senior levels. The Tokyo Stock Exchange now requires listed companies to publish their diversity policies and goals.**

**Governments can be helpful in a range of ways in supporting greater female labour force participation overall. Addressing the issue of the disproportionate unpaid care burden carried by women for the care of children is crucial. Access to affordable, accessible, and quality early childhood care and education is essential. Overall women do three-quarters of the world's unpaid work. That needs to change, not only within families, but also because social provision steps up on care of the young, the old, and people who are ill and who are disabled.**

**Boosting gender equality has immensely positive impacts for companies and for economies and societies at large. The [World Bank's Gender Employment Gap Index](#) indicates that, on average, across countries, long-run GDP per capita would be almost twenty per cent higher if all gender employment gaps were closed. When I was New Zealand Prime Minister, we identified the gender employment gap as a factor constraining our level of GDP per capita. That led to new policies for affordable child care, paid parental leave as an entitlement for all workers, and longer annual holidays, with the aim of helping families to balance work and family responsibilities.**

**Over the years, research has consistently identified that companies with higher levels of women on their boards and senior management tend to [get better results](#). It stands to reason that such companies are likely to be more attuned to the needs of women clients and consumers. For financial services, this increasingly matters as more and more women achieve financial independence and are making decisions about where they invest and spend.**

**In conclusion, I believe we can dream of a world where women are equally represented at all levels of the public, private, and non-governmental sectors. But, to create that world, we must do more than dream. We must act. As I have described, there are many practical things which can be done to advance gender equality – which after all is a key Sustainable Development Goal. Asia with its comparatively high female labour force participation and with the value it attaches to education can be a leader in the full inclusion of women in all sectors. My challenge to the finance sector is to lead in this area and show that it can be done.**