

## **Introduction**

The Australian export sector contributes more than 22 per cent to Australia's GDP [1]. It is a critical sector that not only drives innovation, investment and employment, but increases Australia's profile within the global competitive market place.

Australian Governments have been active in the pursuit of bilateral and regional trade agreements to help ensure Australian exporters and the economy is competitive and dynamic.

At the current time, Australia has six free trade agreements (FTA), five with countries – Chile, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand and the United States of America and one with a region – ASEAN.

Despite many efforts by many contributors (governments and the business community) to address barriers to trade, much on tangible items such as intellectual property; regulation; licensing; and market awareness; a number of intangible barriers to trade still remain and haven't been addressed by previous FTA discussions. These intangible barriers particularly effect women exporters.

## **Women's Participation in International Trade**

As government and industry agencies largely don't segment business registration and export data by gender, figures regarding women's participation in global trade are only estimates at best. According to estimates from Austrade, approximately 9% of SME exporters are run by women alone, and many more are co-run and co-owned by women.<sup>2</sup>[2]

## **Impediments to Participation**

Australia and the countries it has a trade agreement with are all signatories to the 1979 United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Despite this commitment, women exporters still report: discrimination and stereotyping on the basis of gender and perceived or actual carer status; lack of access to decision-makers; in-country work practices that are not family-friendly, and lack of access and representation on decision-making boards and forums. It is the last point that I draw the attention of the commissioners.

In the Australian exporting and business community, decision making boards are still under-represented by women. Businesswomen of Australia represent approximately 8.3% of ASX 200 company directors. Their representation on exporting and trade related boards and industry groups is also far less.

The 2008 Federal Government's Mortimer Review of Exporting did not have any female representation on its review board. Australian bi-lateral councils and its business boards still remain under-represented by gender and none of the Councils are currently chaired by a woman.

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1[1] Australian Institute of Export – [www.aiex.com.au](http://www.aiex.com.au)

2[2] Austrade – [www.austrade.gov.au](http://www.austrade.gov.au)

“Getting more women on boards and into senior management roles is not just about gender equity. It’s also about our desire to remain internationally competitive. No country, industry or organisation can afford to waste the skills of more than half of its population”. – Elizabeth Broderick, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner. 3[3]

### **Conclusion**

Trade agreements need to recognise the contribution of women exporters in its frameworks and local practices. In order to maximise the contribution from women exporters, it is time for trade agreements to recognise and address the lack of access to decision making forums that women exporters continue to face.

### **Submitter**

Melanie O’Toole

Former, Singapore-Australia Young Business Ambassador

Former board member, United Nations Development Fund for Women

Director, International Women’s Federation of Commerce & Industry

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3[3] “Mandatory Quotas May be Needed on Boards”, Australian Financial Review, 8 April 2010.