

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS '99

"Women's Economic Summit of the Americas forging alliances on and offline"

By Dawn Weiner

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) - From Peruvian woolmakers to Argentine ranchers and U.S. entrepreneurs, women from 34 countries spanning the Americas gathered from Friday to discuss building a global network of businesswomen with help from the Internet.

The two-day summit ending Saturday was intended to propel more women up the ranks of Latin American businesses and encourage greater entrepreneurship among women.

"As many as a third of all new small businesses are being started by women and the majority of all new small businesses are being started by women," said Irene Natividad, an organizer of the summit, which gathered hundreds of women from the hemisphere. "It is our goal to create a global network of women helping women."

Conference participants discussed how the Internet would become an increasingly powerful tool to connect women to share information and strategies.

But Natividad said there are still many obstacles to better networking.

"Internet access is still limited in this region and is not available to the majority of women globally," she said. "It is expensive to use, phone access tends to be costly in Latin America and women tend to earn less than men."

Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce, Robert Mallett addressed the conference, highlighting the importance of government programs aimed at helping women businesses in the United States and Latin America get off the ground.

He emphasized the importance of the Internet in that effort.

"Nine million businesses are owned by women, that is double the number of women-owned business in 1997," said Mallett. "Only 13 percent of women owned businesses are taking part in the Internet."

While women executives want to reach out more to each other, some said obstacles remain.

"The cost of the telephone is killing me and my business," declared Sonia María Sutlovic, a cattle rancher in San Vicente, Argentina.

Sutlovic, whose family-owned business is looking for a South American niche in marketing eggs and pork, came to the symposium hoping for international contacts to export outside Argentina.

The women also discussed problems with securing loans and financial backing for their ventures.

"The first purchases for the majority of women operating their own business, is done with their husband's credit card," Ana S. de Kessler, the Argentine Secretary of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, declared in her address.

Kessler said that although the Argentine government has instituted a strong incentive policy for female entrepreneurs including small business training and tax deductions for companies which invest in employee education, more needs to be done.

Beatrice Rangel, a Venezuelan corporate strategist, told fellow participants that establishing solid networks among women entrepreneurs and executives is one of the biggest challenges to further growth.

"Women in Latin American need to retake the momentum they had in the 70's and 80's when they banded together and created movements to defend human rights," she said.

She called women the "lever" that helped triggered democratization in Latin America in those days, women managed to rally and fight," she said. Now that democracy has been instilled on those countries, she added, it was not a time to sit back.

"What women don't realize is that once we have freedom, we need to keep working to ensure equality and opportunity for all."