

Women in customs leadership: why does it matter?

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Abstract

While positive efforts to advance women have been made, women remain significantly underrepresented in customs leadership. This paper explores the challenges facing women in Customs in the Asia-Pacific region by conducting a survey with women from the authors' administrations. Based on this research, we offer concrete recommendations to promote women in customs leadership. The findings identify a range of barriers, with some shared and some particular to individual agencies and/or countries. The article concludes that ensuring the safety of women should be the first priority, followed by the development of policies and instruments to promote women, and that leadership and professional development programs should be conducted for all women in Customs around the world.

Keywords: women, Customs, leadership, development, promote, recommendations, barriers

1. Introduction

During the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, the United Nations (UN, 1995) highlighted that 'without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved'. Almost 30 years after this statement, the presence of women in law enforcement leadership, and particularly in customs administrations, remains low with especially low numbers in developing countries. The World Customs Organization (WCO) states that in 2020-21, men occupy 84 per cent of Heads of Customs positions globally versus 16 per cent for women, and that the total percentage of female customs officers globally is only 37 per cent (WCO, 2021b, p. 52). Customs is still primarily a male-dominated field.

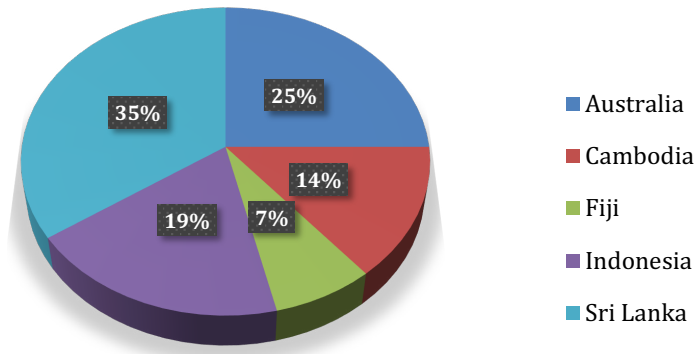
This article emphasises why it is crucial to advance women in Customs. It first examines the current status of women in customs administrations globally and particularly in South Asia, South-East Asia, the Pacific and Australia using examples from Australia, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Then, it identifies key barriers hindering women's progression into leadership roles. Finally, it concludes with potential policy options to make customs leadership roles more accessible to women worldwide.

2. Methodology and scope

We used a desk-based study to collect data from existing documents and reports. Findings were also supported through a survey which addressed key obstacles faced by women customs officers

pursuing professional advancement. The survey was conducted through questionnaires delivered to 136 female officers from all ranks and positions from customs administrations in Australia, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, serving as a representative sample for South Asia, South-East Asia, the Pacific and Australia. Figure 1 shows the geographical breakdown of the 136 responses received.

Figure 1: Survey responses received from each country



Source: Authors

3. Why do women belong in customs leadership?

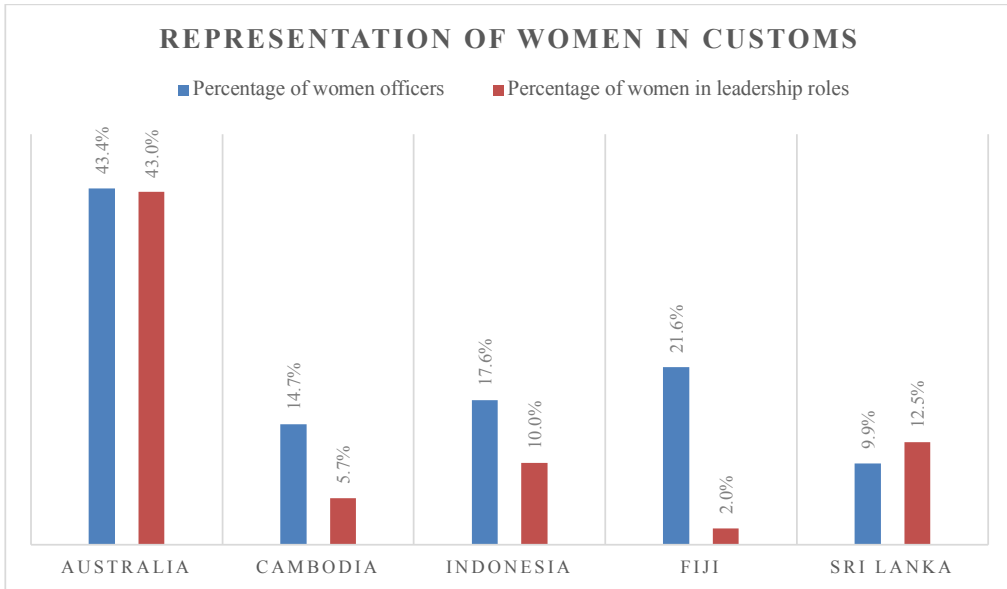
Gender balance can enable resilience, innovation and growth within Customs (Clanok, 2021). In the 2021 WCO virtual event on ‘Women in Customs’, Dr Kunio Mikuriya (WCO Secretary General) emphasised that ‘Promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace encourages innovation and improves individual and organisational performance since people with different backgrounds bring different perspectives and ideas to the table’ (WCO, 2021a). In support of this statement, other progressive senior customs leaders have also expressed their commitment to encourage women’s representation at all levels of Customs.

Women belong at all levels of Customs, including senior management positions. Administrations that actively address gender diversity tend to perform better because they can mobilise new perspectives and ideas within their human resources (WCO, 2013). It is not only about fairness but about working towards sustainable growth, high performance and being inclusive organisations. ‘We need to be proactive, we need to engage women. If we are not engaging women, we are missing out on 50% of the best people’ (Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons, 2021).

4. What is the current situation of women in customs leadership?

In 2021, the WCO reported that women hold 16 per cent of customs leadership roles and 26 per cent of senior management roles. Worldwide, 37 per cent of the global customs workforce is female (WCO, 2021b, p. 52). Women’s representation in customs administrations varies geographically, being significantly lower in the Asia-Pacific region than in Australia. The chart below illustrates the percentage of women officers and leaders in customs administrations in Australia, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

Figure 2: Current representation of women in customs



Source: Authors

The Australia Border Force (ABF) has worked actively and steadily over the past decade to become a gender-balanced administration with the highest percentage of women among all surveyed countries. Women's leadership in ABF is heading towards gender parity with 40 per cent representation at the executive level and 46 per cent at the senior executive level (Department of Home Affairs, 2019, p. 183). This commitment to building a diverse workforce ensures that ABF senior leadership equitably represents the communities they serve.

The percentage of women officers in the Asia-Pacific region is extraordinarily low. As of 2021, the percentage of women officers in customs administrations surveyed in South-East Asia, South Asia and the Pacific averages 7.4 per cent. A small pool of women officers in frontline roles has repercussions for leadership, and even fewer women have been promoted to leadership positions. Almost all director and chief levels are occupied by men, with women representing between 2 per cent to 12.5 per cent of management level positions in Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. Most of the women promoted only reach deputy levels.

It is noted that women's engagement in officer ranks in Fiji Customs has grown significantly from 4.3 per cent in 1995 to 21.6 per cent in 2020. However, male officers still form the overwhelming majority at the highest levels. The figures are also disproportionate in Sri Lanka Customs where only 9.9 per cent of officers are women and 12.2 per cent of leadership positions are held by women. Moreover, Sri Lanka Customs sets limits on women's participation, effectively restricting the total number of women officers within the institution to 10 per cent of the workforce.

5. What is stopping women in Customs from progressing in their careers?

Women in Customs face common hurdles that are typical in male-dominated workplaces. Cultural and social barriers, unconscious gender bias, low self-confidence and motivation and inadequate safety measures are some of the main obstacles identified in the survey, which will be analysed in detail below.

Firstly, 72 per cent of respondents identified social preconceptions, such as the expectation for women to take care of the household, as the main obstacle to women's professional advancement within Customs. Gendered responsibilities include looking after elderly parents and children and being in charge of household chores. These time-consuming obligations limit women's opportunities to invest in their professional and personal development. Furthermore, women with young children (0–3 years) seem to struggle if they do not have someone to look after their children while at work. Sixty-five per cent of respondents identified the lack of available childcare facilities in the workplace as a specific challenge, leaving some women no choice but to leave their customs workforce until their children reach school age.

Secondly, unconscious biases towards women and gendered stereotypes can hinder women's progress into leadership positions. Over 60 per cent of the women surveyed believed that they or other women in their agency may not be selected for some positions due to perceptions they have limited physical strength or that certain work is not suitable for women. Furthermore, almost half of all respondents believed that women's voices are not heard in meetings or decision-making situations, believing that male leaders are listened to, valued and respected more than female leaders. Both men and women need to be aware of such biases and stereotypes and work together to minimise them.

The survey results also illustrate that lack of self-confidence and motivation are further barriers that need to be addressed. More than half the respondents believe that women tend to underestimate their capabilities and experience, while half think that women are more risk-averse. Such responses were common to all countries participating in the survey, with 90 per cent of respondents in Australia identifying it as a key barrier to women's professional progress.

Lack of safety and sexual harassment at the workplace are obstacles for women in Customs in Sri Lanka and Fiji. These barriers can directly affect women's professional confidence, effectiveness and career engagement, which may drive them to leave their employment. The impact on mental health can be severe. Over 62 per cent of respondents identified night shifts and safety factors in isolated offices as key barriers. Customs administrations work 24/7 to facilitate international trade, and night shifts cannot be eliminated. Moreover, customs work commonly requires officers to perform their duties from isolated offices situated in remote locations. Such settings can prove especially difficult for women unless their administrations resolve personal safety and logistical issues.

6. What is being done well around the world?

In 2013, the WCO Secretariat encouraged the advancement of women in leadership roles within Customs during the *Women in Customs, Trade, and Leadership* conference. As an outcome of this conference, the WCO *Gender Equality Organisational Assessment Tool (GEOAT)* was launched. The GEOAT aims to assist customs administrations in assessing their policies, practices and activities, helping them to explore how gender equality can be further incorporated into their reform and modernisation agendas. In 2017, the WCO stepped up its efforts to launch new initiatives to promote gender equality as well as broader diversity and inclusiveness issues in Customs. Further to this,

a blended training package, *Advancing Gender Equality in Customs* was developed and includes a one-week workshop and an e-learning module on raising awareness on gender equality within Customs.

‘Gender Equality and Diversity is not only a question of human rights, but also considered a prerequisite for achieving sustainable development, growth and competitiveness’ (WCO, 2020, p. 6). The WCO has documented good practice experiences and methodologies of global customs administrations who are successfully advancing the gender equality and diversity agenda. According to WCO (2020), a number of countries have achieved positive steps in advancing women in customs leadership by:

- implementing action plans, frameworks, policies and procedures to support gender equality and women’s advancement in the workplace
- developing gender networks to help drive and progress initiatives, increase advocacy, participate in strategy and policy development, and provide leadership on how to achieve improved gender equality at all levels of customs administrations
- identifying gender gaps in pay standards, recruitment processes and other demographics to determine whether women are proportionately represented at all levels
- recognising ‘You can’t be what you can’t see’, and improving the gender balance within leadership structures
- implementing strategies and goals to support women progressing into leadership roles, including networking and mentoring programs, training and capacity building programs and ensuring transparency and equal opportunity for career development and promotion.

It is hoped that these practices will inspire others to promote the growth of women leaders in customs administrations.

7. What are our recommendations?

When considering national-level responses, there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. The survey revealed variations according to cultural, political and social circumstances in each country, including:

- a proposal by Cambodian, Fijian and Sri Lankan officers that ensuring safety for women in the workplace is their most important strategy to promote women’s leadership in their customs administrations
- the identification by Indonesian officers that the development of policies and instruments is their most important step in promoting women’s leadership in their customs administrations
- the identification by Australian officers that encouraging and supporting women to pursue their career goals is their most important measure to promote women’s leadership in their customs administration.

7.1. Promoting and supporting women in Customs

Policies promoting equal representation in leadership positions across customs administrations should be encouraged. This can be accomplished by ensuring that management roles offer an appropriate work-life balance and by attracting and recruiting new managers using a competency-based management approach. Male champions are vital to women’s voices being heard in the workplace,

and a positive way for them to show their support is through targeted workplace policies. According to the survey, Indonesian officers identified this as their most important recommendation for promoting women's leadership in Customs. Lastly, customs administrations should ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities regardless of gender. A fair and supportive work environment and facilities are key factors to encourage women to have confidence in their capabilities and to strive for better career opportunities. This includes enhancing women's access to professional settings such as conferences, external network meetings and other major events that enable them to try different roles and positively reassess their self-worth.

7.2. Leadership training and mentoring programs for women

Customs administrations can overcome traditional limitations and promote women's advancement into leadership roles by implementing the following practices:

- mentoring and sponsorship programs: to provide guidance, lessons learned and successful approaches, assist in growth opportunities, help advocate visibility in the organisation and identify opportunities, and provide assistance in moving towards future positions
- networking: to provide opportunities for women officers to communicate with national and international colleagues, nurturing a sense of belonging and building rapport and relationships to assist in career advancement
- leadership and training programs: to provide access to specialised training programs that enhance capacity, build confidence, advance professional development, promote collaboration within a supportive community and empower women as they proactively advance their careers in Customs.

According to the survey, implementing mentoring programs, delivering leadership training courses and supporting women to build confidence were rated as practical and achievable solutions for women overcoming barriers and progressing into leadership positions.

7.3. Ensuring safety for women in the workplace

When considering the national survey responses, many women from Asia and the Pacific highlighted safety as a key barrier to women's advancement, while Australian respondents rated safety as their least important priority. This is possibly due to prevailing social and cultural norms in the respective societies. In addition, the International Labour Organization (2020) has also identified the cruciality of ensuring safety in the workplace. This element can definitely improve the morale, effectiveness and engagement of women employees, resulting in better career development. The following recommendations should be considered to ensure safety for women in the workplace:

- introducing policies that strictly prohibit and punish sexual and verbal harassment
- establishing clear disciplinary procedures
- providing training on awareness, good practices and responsibilities
- installing surveillance cameras
- introducing mechanisms to report incidents and to monitor and provide support if needed.

8. Conclusion

Despite the fact that the crucial role played by women in Customs is generally well recognised, social norms and expectations, gender stereotypes and unequal domestic responsibilities seem to significantly hold women back from dreaming big, pursuing their goals or even considering their own career advancement. In some countries, women even face insecurity and harassment at work, which becomes yet another challenge to overcome. Regardless of the region, ensuring safety for women should be the first priority. Policies and environments that support women in Customs are undeniably necessary. A mentoring/leadership program created particularly for women can empower them, equipping them with the necessary skills and knowledge to pursue their own professional goals and help build confidence and self-belief to accomplish them.

Gender diversity matters in Customs. Our administrations are at the forefront of international efforts to manage international goods movement. We should also be at the forefront of promoting diversity in our workplaces. Women's inclusion in leadership positions is not only about fairness but also about providing the best possible opportunity for our administrations to reach their highest potential through diversity, innovation and inclusivity. Certainly, the steps towards achieving gender parity began in our agencies decades ago. Now is the time to pick up the pace and advance our efforts to include and promote women in the customs sector. It simply starts with us. What are we waiting for? We can all play a role in 'achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world' (Mikuriya, 2021). The positive gender decisions that we and our customs administrations make today will certainly strengthen our organisations in preparation for better managing the future customs landscape. If not us, who? And, if not now, when?

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