

Get ready for a new mindset on women in customs leadership

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Abstract

Around the world, progressive customs administrations recognise the importance of strengthening their gender balance. In the past decade, the deliberate efforts of contemporary leaders have resulted in positive organisational changes focused on equitable opportunities to prepare women and men for customs leadership. We know that customs administrations are capable of large-scale and rapid transformation – the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated just how adaptive and responsive they can be. We contend that customs administrations are well-placed to drive timely, organisation-wide change that will make gender diversity a reality. This paper highlights the need for diversity in administrations and introduces the Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme (CCP – WPDP) that is designed to significantly advance diversity in agencies to strengthen their organisational effectiveness.

Keywords: Customs, leadership, women, adaptive, inclusive, cooperation

What is the current situation for women in Customs?

Women play a critical role in global security (Tafili, 2021). However, like other national law enforcement agencies (including police and immigration), Customs continues to be a male-majority profession. In 2021, the World Customs Organization (WCO) reported that 37 per cent of the global customs workforce are women and 16 per cent of senior customs roles are held by women (WCO, 2021). In the Asia–Pacific region, women’s representation in frontline and leadership roles in national customs administrations is expected to be even lower.

Facilitating the legitimate movement of goods across international borders requires a quality workforce. Gender diversity at all levels within customs administrations ensures more effective outcomes for operational procedures, global trade facilitation and national security (Outram, 2021).

Increasing women’s representation and leadership in Customs has been linked to better Customs outcomes, systemic organisational improvements, greater integrity and improved disruption of corrupt practices. ‘When women lead, we all win’ (Brandolino, 2021).

What positive steps can we already see for women in Customs?

In the past decade, international stakeholders, including the WCO, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and customs agencies around the world have actively shown a practical commitment to advancing gender through efforts to enhance conditions and opportunities, which allow women and men to have the same rights based on their skills (WCO, 2019). This has resulted in positive steps towards addressing the barriers women face in both joining and pursuing a career in Customs, including recruitment, working conditions, workplace safety and career progress.

‘Around the world, we see national defence forces and the private sector are already championing equality and taking impressive steps to build inclusive workplaces’ (Dowler, 2021). Let us reflect on our national customs administrations. If we have active gender policies, inclusive recruitment processes, specialised training programs and affirmative opportunities for women and men, we are already on the right track. But international data confirms that, in Customs, we are at the beginning of our journey. With 84 per cent of Customs leadership roles held by men (WCO, 2021), agencies need to quicken the pace of change. This need not seem like an insurmountable task. A vast array of international tools already exists to support organisations to take confident and proactive steps towards strengthening gender diversity.

The Container Control Program (CCP) Women’s Network is a prime example of an innovative initiative supporting customs administrations to actively embrace gender diversity. Established in 2015 with the overarching objective of promoting women’s participation and leadership in law enforcement professions, the CCP Women’s Network has coordinated with national authorities to foster an inclusive dialogue, encourage new workplace measures, evaluate gender representation, deliver gender sensitisation training and a range of other activities. These initiatives have contributed to a higher percentage of women engaged in Port Control Units (PCUs) and Air Cargo Control Units (ACCU) across the world, including more women appointed to leadership roles in customs administrations.

Time to shake things up! How do we escalate women’s engagement in Customs?

We need to be proactive. We need to engage women. If we are not actively creating opportunities for women in all levels of our customs administrations, we are failing to reach 50 per cent of the best talent (Fitzsimmons, 2021).

We all have a role to play in advancing women and men in our customs administrations. Sometimes the terminology around gender diversity seems complicated. Other times, the measures might appear too complex. However, the actual steps are simpler than we realise. Consider your agency’s policies, practices and activities. An important starting point is having a practical and active gender policy which is shared and well-understood at all levels of the agency. The policy needs to be actively applied to ensure women and men are actively engaged at all levels of recruitment, training, decision-making and career progression. The organisation should also provide a safe work environment, that understands and addresses gender-based challenges and biases. Then, there are personal actions we can all undertake to positively shape our agencies. The first action? A mindset that gender inclusivity in Customs requires us to realise that positive change isn’t someone else’s responsibility – it begins with each of us.

In August 2021, the Australian Border Force (ABF) united with the UNODC and the WCO CCP Women’s Network to deliver the inaugural Container Control Programme – Women’s Professional Development Programme (CCP – WPDP). This was no ordinary training program: delivered through the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) Transnational Security Centre (TSC), 58 emerging female Customs leaders from 11 countries across South Asia, South-East Asia, the Pacific

and Australia united for a four-week, online, part-time, innovative and immersive experience focused on building leadership capabilities, technical skills and international connections. The four core modules examined adaptive leadership, the future customs landscape, trusted customs networks and 'realising our full potential'. The CCP – WPDP was committed to inspiring and upskilling female customs officers to become capable, confident and future-ready leaders.

Mindful of the persistent obstacles to women's advancement in Customs, the CCP – WPDP was designed to bring positive change for emerging women leaders. While this was a groundbreaking initiative to advance women's engagement in leadership, the methodology applied by the partners is an easily transferable model that can be replicated by agencies seeking to proactively redress women's under-representation. There is no secret formula – the partners simply shared a united commitment and backed this with practical efforts to:

- work in partnership with customs administrations to identify emerging women leaders
- purposefully create training opportunities which advance women's leadership skills
- create a platform for women to engage with positive leadership role models
- establish a trusted network enabling women to engage with international customs partners.

What was different about the CCP – WPDP?

Future customs leaders are curious and active learners who seek engagement, interaction and robust discussion with positive role models. They crave practical learning tools, opportunities for partnership and contemporary perspectives to prepare for the rigours of Customs management and leadership. The CCP – WPDP successfully exceeded the participants' expectations through the following methodology.

Critically, the CCP – WPDP was designed as a leadership program for women (not a gender program for women). This represented a definitive change in mindset. We already know that women are underrepresented in Customs, so we decided to get straight to business by intentionally offering women an opportunity to participate in advanced leadership training that would build their confidence and skills to manage the complexities of the future customs landscape. The four-module curriculum immersed participants in contemporary themes building their capabilities as innovative, collaborative, inclusive, proactive and adaptive leaders.

The CCP – WPDP applied creative learning tools to engage participants, ensure active participation and drive immediate and enduring outcomes for the participants' leadership journeys. Importantly, follow-up included leadership mentoring, community cafes and ongoing professional development opportunities.

Partnership approach

'Together we are stronger' (Outram, 2021) was proposed by Commissioner Michael Outram (Head of the ABF) as the guiding motto for the CCP – WPDP. Indeed, the overarching theme of trusted partnerships was relevant at many levels.

From the outset, a strong foundation of cooperation was established by the partner agencies. To ensure effective implementation and stay ahead of possible challenges, the CCP Women's Network and ABF created an active Working Group. The collaborative nature of the Working Group enabled an integrative approach and smooth coordination ensuring the partners' shared goals were achieved through the CCP – WPDP.

In addition, the CCP – WPDP actively promoted partnerships with international customs stakeholders, governments, UN Agencies, policy institutes, academia, the private sector and law enforcement agencies. Forty-nine leaders and experts shared thought-provoking perspectives and personal insight to enhance the participants' technical knowledge and leadership skills thereby further building a cohort of confident and capable leaders.

Participants also actively recognised that the customs threat landscape has changed remarkably during the COVID-19 pandemic. The acceleration of drug manufacturing, changes in trafficking patterns, containerised trade and parcel post, and new developments in the movement of illicit goods affirm that cooperation is more important than ever before (Douglas, 2021). For most participants, this program was their first opportunity to engage with customs officers in other countries. The resulting network has already become self-sustaining, providing a powerful platform for participants and partners to exchange experiences and intelligence. Most importantly, the participants formed a trusted network with their international customs counterparts. The participants' feedback speaks about the value of these Customs-to-Customs connections:

‘Connecting with my sisters from different countries is truly overwhelming’. (CCP – WPDP participant, Maldives)

‘I have already started scanning onshore detections from CCP – WPDP participating countries and I am working on processes to share this information’. (CCP – WPDP participant, Australia)

‘Transnational criminals don't respect borders. The best way to be ahead of them is to share information with international Customs partners’. (CCP – WPDP participant, Fiji)

What did we achieve through the CCP – WPDP?

A key objective of the CCP – WPDP was to empower emerging women leaders to advance their leadership journeys in Customs. The participants' qualitative and quantitative feedback indicates they experienced a significant and valuable increase in their confidence to lead, influence, and make decisions in their professional roles, which is now positively impacting border security:

Even when I was contemplating signing up for this program, I almost talked myself out of it because I didn't think I was capable enough or skilled enough to join such a prestigious program, and I didn't think I would be able to keep up with the course. However, this program has shown me that big words such as innovation, adaptive mindset and resilience are not to be feared and they are not as difficult as they sound! The program has given me very practical guidance and ideas on how to improve myself and work on my leadership, and that has boosted my confidence so much, as now I am able to think to myself, ‘hey, it's not that hard!’ Leadership is no longer an abstract, difficult to understand concept, but a realistic goal with practical and achievable strategies and steps. (CCP – WPDP participant, Malaysia)

Participants attest that they graduated from the CCP – WPDP with a new mindset about their own capabilities and a determined readiness to apply adaptive, proactive, inclusive, collaborative and innovative approaches as they progress in their leadership roles:

CCP – WPDP is an excellent program where women officers realise their full potential and become future leaders in their respective agencies; it allows active engagement with notable and respected leaders of various organisations...and the most important part of the program is everyone is treated as family, and it's so much fun! (CCP – WPDP participant, Philippines)

We need diversity (Kvigne, 2021). The CCP – WPDP opened a pathway for women to explore their future leadership directions. This step is a critical launching pad as we transform the diversity in administrations, and there’s no reason to wait. It’s a goal we should all aspire to now. This sentiment is shared by Dr Kunio Mikuriya, Secretary General of the WCO (WCO, 2021) who states:

Promoting diversity and inclusion in the workplace encourages innovation, and improves both individual and organisational performance, since people with different backgrounds bring different perspectives and ideas to the table. It is a question of human rights, sustainable development and wellbeing.

So, what are you going to do?

The future customs landscape is complex and uncertain. The pressures in our operating environment continue to rise. Customs administrations are a cornerstone of national revenue and are increasingly asked to do more with less. Criminals are constantly looking for opportunities in the international supply chain. As we strive to facilitate international goods movement and address security at our borders, we need our best team and our best talent.

We all need to be champions who are committed to positive change for women in Customs. It’s 2021! It’s what we should be doing! Women make up 50% of society. Law enforcement professionals should mirror that - it’s not even a question! (Amberg, 2021)

So, what is the current situation for women and men in your administration? If women are not close to 50 per cent of your workforce and your leadership – now is your chance to take positive and practical actions.

‘We need women in the room’ (Stevenson, 2021). The CCP – WPDP provided an empowering opportunity for women officers in Asia and the Pacific to advance their career pathways in their national customs administrations. It wasn’t hard. There was nothing complex about the concept. It was a simple, determined effort by key Customs stakeholders to deliver a program outside the usual format, which truly made a difference for women in Customs and enhanced women’s future ability to be in the room, alongside their male counterparts, actively contributing to the future decisions and directions of their administrations.

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