



# WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

## Interview with Laura Chao Onyambu, Kenya Revenue Authority



As part of the WCO Women in Customs campaign, on 19 August 2024, the WCO Secretariat spoke to Laura Chao Onyambu, Chief Manager of Trade Facilitation at the Customs and Border Control Department of the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA). With over 20 years' experience working in Customs, Laura has held multiple positions, navigating through challenges and leadership roles with determination and resilience. In this interview, she shares her journey, the obstacles she overcame and her vision for the future.

**WCO:** What led you to join the Kenya Revenue Authority?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** It was somewhat accidental, or perhaps serendipitous! I grew up on the Kenyan coast and graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce Marketing degree from the University of Nairobi. Working for the government, particularly in Customs, had never crossed my mind. Then, one day, I saw an advertisement in the newspaper announcing that the Kenya Revenue Authority was hiring, and I thought to myself, "That sounds intriguing – I'll give it a go!" My siblings teased me for finding a job through a newspaper ad, but I applied, went through the interview process, and was offered a position as a graduate trainee in 2003.

The two-year training programme involved shadowing KRA officers across various departments. We rotated through Customs (then known as Customs and Excise), domestic taxes and road transport. At the end of the training, we were randomly assigned to various departments within the KRA, and I found myself in the Investigation and Enforcement Department of the Customs unit.

**WCO:** At the time, was there a policy to hire more women?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** I'm not certain, but I do believe being a woman worked in my favour, along with my background from a minority tribe. Kenya has over 40 tribes, each with its own history, traditions and attributes. Some tribes are underrepresented in public institutions, and there was a policy to offer civil servant jobs to members of these minority tribes. This policy continues to this day.

**WCO:** Did you encounter any discrimination or challenges as a woman?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** When I joined the KRA, there were far fewer women in Customs than today. Some men doubted our capabilities, especially when we had families. They often made unfounded assumptions, denying us opportunities based on outdated assumptions.

Another challenge was dealing with transfers. As a KRA officer, you might be asked to relocate to another town or region, which happened to me while I had young children. My husband was working in Nairobi, and he couldn't always follow us. Later, when I was appointed Chief Manager in charge of the Container Freight Stations in Mombasa, I had to leave Nairobi again. This time, my family stayed in the capital, and I commuted every weekend.

From the beginning, I knew I had to speak up, prove myself and stand out. I'm proud to say that I've always put my heart into every task. My dedication paid off when I was recognized as the first runner up in my department for exemplary performance in 2008, and I also received a WCO Certificate of Merit for exceptional service to the KRA.

However, it took six years before I was promoted to a supervisory position. Realizing I needed guidance, I sought out female mentors in managerial roles who guided me on my self-growth journey. Today, there are about as many women as men in senior management positions at the KRA, including our Commissioner, Lilian Nyawanda, who leads the Customs and Border Control Department.

**WCO:** What do you think women have brought to the Administration?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** It may sound biased, but I believe women bring a sense of fairness and inclusivity to leadership. Having faced challenges in being taken seriously, women understand the importance of giving everyone a voice.

They have also come up with new ways of doing things. Now that we have women in leadership positions, we are seeing options such as flexible working hours being brought in. Such a measure would be really beneficial to women with a family.

**WCO:** Are there any achievements that you are especially proud of?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** During my time as a tax investigator, some of my investigations led to successful prosecutions. This work required not only a deep understanding of

regulations and the ability to analyse data but also strong negotiation and communication skills.

In 2021, I was promoted to Chief Manager and joined the Customs and Border Control Department. Transitioning from investigations to operations was challenging but exciting. I had to manage a team of 261 officers and focus on revenue collection, trade facilitation and stakeholder engagement. We worked on building trust and streamlining processes by establishing open communication channels between all stakeholders, collecting feedback from taxpayers and significantly reducing red tape. I worked with government agencies, the Kenya Ports Authority, the National Registration Authority and the Kenya Bureau of Standards, as well as various business entities.

Today, as Chief Manager in charge of trade facilitation, I oversee programmes and initiatives to enhance taxpayer compliance through education and engagement. My marketing degree is finally coming into play! We've improved transparency, and people are now better informed about the regulations. We're also working on simplifying tax declarations for small and medium taxpayers, with an upcoming mobile app to make the process easier.

**WCO:** How did you manage to balance your career with family responsibilities?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** It wasn't always easy with three children, but I had a supportive husband. Early on in our marriage, we agreed that his career would take priority, so he worked long hours while I maintained a more predictable schedule. As I advanced in my career, he took on more responsibilities at home, and we hired domestic staff to help out around the house. I always made sure to spend quality time with my children in the evenings and at weekends.

I lost my husband to COVID when I was working in Mombasa, so I am now a single parent. My children, two of them now teenagers, still need my support. One of them is actually interested in following in my footsteps and pursuing a career in Customs.

**WCO:** We are so sorry to hear that. It must have been a really difficult time for you and your family.

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** Thank you. The Commissioner kindly arranged for my return to Nairobi to be with my children. I was deeply touched by the support I received from the Commissioner, my team and others.

**WCO:** What advice would you give to young professionals?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** I've had the opportunity to mentor both men and women. My advice is not to shy away from challenges. Be confident, embrace your uniqueness and don't be afraid to stand out. I've seen many young professionals, including two I mentored, rise to very high positions – even higher than mine!

Women in particular often struggle with impostor syndrome and are overly critical of themselves. It's important to work on one's attitude and mindset. But this applies to men as well. I've encouraged male officers in my team to challenge themselves and seek mentors, reminding them, with a smile, not to let women have all the success!

Continual learning is also crucial. I've taken numerous courses on financial investigations, leadership and management, and even earned an MBA in Strategic Management in 2015.

**WCO:** What does leadership mean to you, and what is your approach to it?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** Leadership is about influencing people towards a common goal. I make sure that everyone in my team feels involved and accountable, ensuring that everyone understands their role in achieving our department's objectives. I empathize with those at the lower grades because I've been there myself. I share my experiences and the challenges I've faced, fostering a sense of solidarity.

Engagement with staff is essential. I take the time to visit my team members at their desks, and I genuinely care about their well-being. As a leader, it's also important to address personal issues that affect work. I've dealt with cases of alcoholism and depression within my team, ensuring that those affected received the support they needed.

I've also taken several leadership courses, starting in 2010, and I most recently completed the Commonwealth Association of Tax Administrators Senior Leadership Programme in 2023/2024.

**WCO:** Do you have any hobbies or activities outside of work?

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** My kids and I support Children's Home, an NGO that helps orphans and destitute children. We donate clothes and food, and one of my children teaches music to the kids there. It's important to share our skills and give time and attention to others.

**WCO:** It truly is. Thank you for taking the time to share your career journey and life experience with us.

**Laura Chao Onyambu:** It's a great honour to be part of a campaign celebrating women and Customs. I hope my story encourages both women and men in Customs to aim high and give their all, no matter what obstacles they may face.