



WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

Meet Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: A pillar of integrity in Customs

In an interview with the Head of the WCO Secretariat Communications Unit, Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney, a seasoned officer from the Jamaica Customs Agency, shares her journey of leadership and unwavering commitment to integrity. Discover how she navigated the complexities of her role as part of committees spearheading major reforms, including the Electronic Cargo processing system that transformed Customs operations. Naomi's story is a powerful reminder of how steadfast ethics and proactive governance can redefine efficiency and transparency in Customs administration. Gain insights into her strategies for training her team, fostering a culture of transparency, and her advice for young officers entering the field.



[Read the full interview to explore the impactful world of Customs through Naomi's eyes and learn why she believes in the transformative power of integrity.](#)

Ludovic Thanay: Naomi, thank you for joining us. Can you start by telling us a bit about how you began your career in Customs?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: Absolutely, Ludovic. My journey into Customs started in 1986 when I was 17. I did not like school and wanted to work. At that time, the Collector General's Department had recently been divided into the Customs and Excise Department on the one side and the Inland Revenue on the other, and my father worked as a revenue field officer with the Inland Revenue. So I applied for a job and was asked if I wanted to work for tax or Customs. I chose Customs simply because I wanted to carve out my own path, distinct from the one my father had followed. When I joined Customs, he told me: "Always conduct your work so that you never have to look down in shame." I didn't know anything about Customs and didn't fully

understand those words, but I soon realized what he'd meant, and those words have guided my entire career.

Ludovic Thanay: That's a solid foundation on which to start your career. Over the years, how has your role evolved in Customs?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: My career in Customs has been a journey of constant learning and adaptation. I began as a receipts clerk and moved into various roles, each with increasing responsibility. I've been involved in operations, enforcement and policy development. I was a part of the implementation of several key projects, including the modernization of our Customs administration system, which significantly increased efficiency and transparency. I am now a manager in operations where I oversee all operational activities across Kingston Freeport Terminal.

I should mention that, after five years of working in Customs, you were allowed three years of study leave. So I went to college to study business and later to university for a Bachelor in Business Studies and a Master of Science in Workforce Education and Development. I knew that I needed to educate myself in order to build a career, even though, at the time, it was not a requirement. It came later, and I was ready for it.

Ludovic Thanay: How did your father's advice help you navigate the challenges you faced in Customs?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: In Customs, the challenges are unique because you're working at the intersection of law, ethics and public service. My father's advice was based on integrity – keeping my hands clean even when the environment made it easy to exploit for personal gain. This principle kept me grounded, especially when I faced situations where others might be bending the rules.

Ludovic Thanay: Speaking of integrity, how have you seen this influence your progression in Customs?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: It's been everything. Early on, I realized that, in order to lead effectively, especially as an independent woman in an environment where, as Lord Acton says, "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely", maintaining an unblemished record was essential. It wasn't just about avoiding corruption; it was about setting a standard for my team and ensuring that we were beyond reproach. This commitment to integrity has defined my leadership style and enabled me to push for reforms and improvements in our operations.

Ludovic Thanay: That's really inspiring, Naomi. Could you share an instance where you felt that your integrity was being tested?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: Of course. There was a time when the right decision was not the easiest one. I was temporarily assigned to a higher position and served two years in that position. Due to my diligence in the execution of my duties, it was observed that a particular client had been proceeding contrary to the regulations for a number of years. I brought it to the attention of my superior and recommended that

the client be given time to meet the standard. I was of the view that immediately applying the law would have been detrimental to the company's ability to operate and morally reprehensible on Custom's part, since he had been operating undetected for many years. Standing firm on my principles, I refused to choose the direction that was pointed to me. It was a challenging period, but it reaffirmed the values I stand for. It earned me the wrath of my superior, but for me it reinforced the importance of integrity in leadership.

Ludovic Thanay: It's clear that you've carved out a role for yourself as a mentor and leader. What advice would you give to young women – and men – entering the field?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: My key piece of advice is: be relentless in your pursuit of excellence and integrity. Customs is a field where you are constantly learning, it is a dynamic environment. I've been learning for the past 38 years, and I know there is still so much that I need to learn and relearn. It is not a place where you simply apply procedures; you need to be curious, think outside the box and take initiative. And if you want to lead, you will have to be fearless and disciplined. Discipline means making unpopular decisions and doing things you would rather not do; but, whatever it is, you must do it with all your might because it is the right thing to do.

You should know that approximately 70% of Jamaica Customs employees are female, and women are represented at the highest positions. I don't think women in Customs meet more challenges than men, but we do have the opportunity to bring empathy, diligence and a fresh perspective to leadership. Customs is a field where you interact with ordinary people. These qualities are crucial in an environment where you often deal with rigid bureaucracies.

Since 2013, I have been serving as an adjunct lecturer at the Caribbean Maritime University for one of the Customs courses offered in the Bachelor of Science in Customs Processes, Freight Forwarding and Immigration Programme. I do grasp the opportunity to impart these virtues to my students. Since 2017, I have also been part of the cadre of trainers of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (IMPACS), a regional body that provides support to member states in crime and security issues. As a trainer, I also strive to instill these values in our trainees.

Ludovic Thanay: How do you balance the demanding nature of your job with your personal life, especially as a mother and community member?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: It's about prioritizing and understanding that you can't do everything alone. Support systems, both at work and home, are crucial. I also believe in being fully present wherever I am, whether that's at work solving problems or at home with my family. This mindfulness has helped me manage the pressures of work while being a supportive wife, mother and community member.

Ludovic Thanay: Naomi, outside of your work, do you have any other passions or projects you're involved with?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: Yes, I am also a farmer. I have an apiary, and I plant small crops and tend to several fruit trees, including papaya and mango trees. It is a hobby, a way to connect with nature and learn about sustainable living. These particular trees are well-suited to our climate, and they offer not only delicious fruits but also a peaceful retreat where I can unwind and gather my thoughts. I may take farming to another level upon my retirement from the civil service within the next three to five years, if life is spared. I am also a licensed real estate agent in Jamaica.

Ludovic Thanay: That sounds quite fulfilling. How does managing a farm influence your approach to other projects or challenges?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: There's a significant overlap between the patience and planning required in farming and the strategic foresight needed in other areas of life. Managing the farm has taught me a lot about anticipating changes, from weather patterns to growth cycles, which parallels the kind of forecasting needed in various endeavours. It's a practice in patience and adaptability, enhancing my ability to manage projects and innovate.

Ludovic Thanay: It seems like your farming experience feeds into your other activities in a very productive way.

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: Absolutely. Each role supports and enriches the other, providing unique insights that contribute to my overall approach to life and work.

Ludovic Thanay: Looking back, would you choose this career path again?

Naomi Goulbourne-Rodney: Without a doubt, Ludovic. Despite its challenges, this career has been incredibly rewarding. It's allowed me to grow, contribute to significant changes and mentor the next generation. The satisfaction of knowing that you've served people and you've maintained your integrity and made a difference is unparalleled.

Ludovic Thanay: Naomi, your story is truly inspiring. It's a testament to the impact that one person can have through dedication and strong, ethical leadership. Thank you for sharing your story with us and for your ongoing contribution to the Customs community.