



WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

Interview with Ester Gomes Dias from São Tomé and Príncipe Customs



As part of our ongoing series celebrating successful women in Customs, we are delighted to present an inspiring interview with Ester Gomes Dias, Deputy Director of the Customs Administration of São Tomé and Príncipe. Ester embodies the strength, resilience and dedication required to drive major reforms. As a mother of three, she has not only navigated the challenging landscape of Customs administration but has also risen to the role of Deputy Director through sheer determination and continuous learning. Beyond her professional achievements, Ester is deeply committed to social causes. She co-founded the NGO “SOS Mulher”, which works tirelessly to combat and prevent violence against women and children. Her story is one of passion, perseverance and profound impact, both within her professional sphere and in her community. Conducted virtually on 10 June 2024, this interview offers a glimpse into Ester’s remarkable journey, her accomplishments and her unwavering commitment to making a difference.

WCO: Ester, thank you for joining us today. Could you start by telling us about your journey into the field of Customs?

Ester Gomes Dias: My journey into Customs began in 2011. I had completed my degree in Business Administration, with an emphasis on foreign trade in Brazil, and had returned to São Tomé and Príncipe. I initially worked in the private sector, but I felt dissatisfied, as the job was not related to what I had been studying. So, when the Customs Administration opened vacancies, I applied and took the entry examination. There were three posts and many applicants. I was second on the final list. One interesting fact is that the three selected candidates were all women. Women are

actually well represented in the Administration. Our Administration is small, with 73 officers, and although the balance between men and women has changed slightly as a result of new recruits joining the organization, with women currently accounting for around 37% of employees, women are still fairly well represented.

WCO: Can you outline your career progression within the Customs Administration and the challenges you've faced?

Ester Gomes Dias: I started working as a verifier, focusing on tariff and classification. During my first year, I also worked at the airport and seaport. After less than two years, I was appointed as head of the tariff and classification department where I gained a deep understanding of Customs procedures, classification, valuation and origin issues, as well as the duty exemptions regime.

I entered Customs at the time it was digitalizing foreign trade procedures, and I was therefore involved in the project, especially to build the module in charge of managing exemptions. I also worked on the Single Window implementation in order to integrate the processes of key stakeholders such as the health and transport ministries and the port authority.

Today, I am Deputy Director, and I work directly in procedures and operational areas, and most my team members are women. I am also the Administration's single point of contact with the Secretariat of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement for matters related to rules of origin. Explaining how I arrived at this position is not easy. I had to work hard and demonstrate consistency and integrity. Many things in life can distract us and take us out of focus, but I remained focused and was able to prove that I have the right qualities to lead. I can get people together to achieve objectives or find solutions to issues. I am also a very proactive person. I don't wait for someone to tell me what to do: I take the initiative and get things done. I'm also passionate about what I do.

WCO: What challenges have you encountered, particularly as a woman in a management position, and how have you overcome them?

Ester Gomes Dias: As a woman, you are sometimes patronized by men. For example, once I had to inspect a truck and was told "this job is not for a woman", but this has never stopped me. I also soon realized that men are more confident to voice their opinions and that life and work are easier for them. I am a wife and mother, and, like most women, I carry most of the mental load of running a household. So having more responsibilities at work was hard – I'm not going to deny it. But I learned to make my voice heard and to express my opinion even when not asked for it.

Then I was offered the post of Deputy Director. Holding such a leadership position in a country like São Tomé and Príncipe, whether you are a man or a woman, is extremely challenging, and I thought it over very carefully before accepting it. I was lucky enough to have had a mentor, our former Director, also a woman, who played a significant role in encouraging me to take the post. Her support was invaluable.

WCO: You clearly have strong management and leadership skills; can you describe your vision of leadership?

Ester Gomes Dias: The years I spent in Brazil taught me the value of supporting one another, and of empowering others to take on more responsibility. I was young when I took on management responsibilities, and I had to gain the respect of people who had been in Customs for a long time. I ensured that I worked with everybody, allowed everyone to share their opinions, encouraged my team to work together and opened their minds so that they could take on job opportunities.

WCO: You joined Customs at the time they were modernizing, can you tell us about your experiences and the challenges you faced during the modernization process?

Ester Gomes Dias: When I joined Customs, we were heavily reliant on paper-based processes. Moving to an electronic system was a significant shift. Initially, there was resistance to change from those who were used to the old ways of doing things. To facilitate this transition, our Director sent us to Angola to learn from their Customs Administration, which had been using the computerized system we were to implement for a number of years. Spending four months in Angola was eye-opening. We returned with the knowledge that helped us implement the system back home. We also looked at how to eliminate paper-based processes and digitalize all procedures.

WCO: You have also been involved in the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement. Can you elaborate on your role and its significance?

Ester Gomes Dias: Yes, I have been part of the Commission responsible for implementing the tariff concessions and rules of origin agreed under the AfCFTA. I'm currently working with my colleagues in the Trade Department who are responsible for deciding which goods to categorize as sensitive and which to exclude from liberalization. This agreement is significant for our country, which depends heavily on import duties, and Customs must provide guidance on how to gain the most benefits from it.

WCO: You have also been deeply involved in the NGO "SOS Mulher" which helps women and children who are victims of violence. Can you tell us more about it?

Ester Gomes Dias: SOS Mulher is an NGO I co-founded with some friends who also studied in Brazil. When we returned to São Tomé and Príncipe, we were deeply moved by the stories of sexual violence against women and children, especially the poorest ones in our society. We felt compelled to do something, so we started SOS Mulher to support the victims of such violence and ask the Government to ensure cases are properly handled. For example, we now have psychologists and lawyers helping victims. Over time, our efforts have led to significant changes, such as establishing a dedicated unit in hospitals to treat victims of sexual violence and ensuring victims are not confronted by their persecutors in court.

WCO: How do you manage to balance your professional responsibilities with your involvement in an NGO and family life?

Ester Gomes Dias: It's certainly challenging. I have three children, and finding time for everything can be difficult. I try to spend quality time with my family on weekends and holidays. My husband is supportive, although he has his own work commitments. It's all about finding a balance and prioritizing what's most important at any given time. For the NGO, we have a dedicated management team, which helps us continue our mission even when my professional duties take up most of my time.

WCO: What do you enjoy doing in your free time to relax and unwind?

Ester Gomes Dias: I love dancing and playing football. It's a wonderful way to relax and have fun with friends.

WCO: Finally, what advice would you give to women aspiring to join and succeed in Customs?

Ester Gomes Dias: My advice is simple: never give up. Customs can be challenging, but it is immensely rewarding. Women should believe in their capabilities and seek knowledge continuously; they should not hesitate to share their opinions and ideas. Building a supportive network and finding mentors is also crucial. Don't let obstacles discourage you; see them as opportunities to grow and prove your worth.

WCO: Thank you, Ester, for sharing your story. Your journey is truly inspiring, and we wish you continued success in all your endeavours.

Ester Gomes Dias: Thank you. It's been a pleasure talking to you.