



WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

Interview with Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda, Sri Lanka Customs



As part of the WCO Women in Customs campaign, the WCO Secretariat spoke with Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda, Deputy Director in the Cargo Examination Directorate of Sri Lanka Customs, on 25 July 2024. Rajitha's story is one of determination in a predominantly male-dominated environment.

Braving challenges such as bias against women's ability to carry out operational activities, she developed sound expertise in various fields and took advantage of opportunities offered by the WCO to study abroad and to support the deployment of the National Customs Enforcement Network (nCEN) application in the WCO Asia/Pacific region. She finds joy not only in her job, but also in her love of coffee, which drove her to learn the art of the barista.

WCO: Rajitha, can you tell us a bit about how you began your career in the Customs Administration of Sri Lanka?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: Absolutely. I joined Customs in 2008. At that time, I was working for a public administration as a management assistant and I had graduated from the University of Kelaniya with a Bachelor of Biological Sciences. I couldn't find a job related to my degree, so I had opted to become a public servant.

My mother, who worked as a book-keeper for a governmental agency, saw in the Government Gazette that the Customs Administration was organizing an open competitive examination for the recruitment to the post of Assistant Superintendent of Customs. Although neither of us knew much about Customs, I decided to give it a go. I had applied for several public servant positions, but Customs was the first agency to call me for an interview and to offer me a job.

WCO: Reflecting on your career, how do you feel about the path you chose?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: Looking back, I know I made the right decision! It was a leap of faith, but one I'm so glad I took. I genuinely love my job. Customs work is so incredibly diverse and, in Sri Lanka, Customs officers are rotated among different directorates every two years, and to different branches within the respective directorate every six months. This constant change requires you to always be learning. We also receive training regularly. Recently, I had the time and opportunity to enrol in a Diploma programme in gemmology, which is a prerequisite to get employed in the Customs Gemmology Unit. I learned about the chemistry behind the formation of gemstones and how to identify different types of gemstones. I got to actually examine various gemstones which are produced in Sri Lanka. It was really exciting.

Since January 2023, I've been serving as a Deputy Director of Customs, initially in the Central Intelligence Directorate and now in the Cargo Examination Directorate. Today, I manage teams that examine cargo in container yards. After 16 years in Customs, I've built extensive knowledge and know-how. I've worked at the airport and at the seaport, and handled issues ranging from post-clearance audit to biodiversity protection. This diverse experience allowed me to contribute to drafting our five-year strategic plan in 2023, which was a significant milestone for me.

WCO: Speaking of milestones, were there any key moments in your career?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: In Sri Lanka Customs, the career system is based on seniority, but two events significantly influenced my professional growth, both linked to the WCO.

In 2013, I applied for the 2014/2015 Strategic Management and Intellectual Property Rights Programme (SMIPRP) at Tokyo's Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU). The Programme, funded by Japan Customs and managed by the WCO Secretariat, was a transformative experience. Before Japan, I was shy and quite reserved. Spending a year abroad and meeting with Customs officers from various parts of the world helped me to become a more assertive and self-confident person.

The second key moment came when I was working at the Central Intelligence Directorate. In 2017, Sri Lanka Customs decided to implement the nCEN application to address the lack of an enforcement database. I was one of four officers designated as nCEN project leaders and was nominated as the WCO nCEN programme leader for Sri Lanka. Thanks to our hard work, Sri Lanka Customs became the 2019 Regional nCEN Programme Leader, promoting the tool across the WCO Asia/Pacific region and organizing workshops for other countries using the application. In 2023, I was accredited as a WCO Technical Operational Adviser on the nCEN and, although I've moved out of the Central Intelligence Directorate, I still have the same responsibilities with respect to the nCEN and can still support nCEN deployments in other countries.

WCO: Can you share some of the unique challenges that women face in your Administration?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: The first challenge is to be recruited. Customs opened recruitment to women through the open competitive exam only in 1993, and no more than 10% of the number of approved vacancies is reserved for female applicants, despite many women applying. Women represent 9% of the Customs Service staff today. This number does not take into account women employed in Customs to work as administrative and management assistants and who are employed for limited periods of three and five years respectively. In other public administrations, they are better represented. As far as I know, in Sri Lanka, the issue may be specific to enforcement agencies such as Customs and Police.

However, once recruited, women and men are given equal opportunities, with promotion based on seniority. Both genders can apply for training and programmes, and expect equal treatment in the selection process.

Being single, I cannot speak about the challenges faced by women with children. However, I look after my parents, and the flexibility required by the job in terms of working hours calls for organization and planning. Like men, women in Customs sometimes have to work at night and this can be challenging if you have family responsibilities. I also encountered some bias when I first joined, with senior officers telling me that Customs wasn't a good job for "ladies". While progress is being made, men are still adjusting to the idea of working alongside women.

The imbalance in the numbers also translates into practical issues. Many Customs facilities lack washrooms reserved for women. In one instance, I was posted in an area without a washroom for women. When I made a request for a dedicated washroom, the sign on one of the washrooms was changed to "ladies only" but I would still sometimes see men inside when I needed to use it, and I felt embarrassed. This is a particularly sensitive problem, especially when women need to change into uniform. Women must sometimes change outside the workplace or commute to headquarters for this.

Logistics become even more complicated when women are transferred to distant Customs offices since there are no gender specific accommodation complexes, resulting in lady officers' privacy being compromised. In such cases, women might be provided with their own accommodation, which can be far from the workplace and impractical for transport, as there may be hazards such as elephants crossing roads and making commuting difficult and even unsafe for women.

WCO: Would you have any advice for women working in Customs?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: Build your confidence, take advantage of opportunities, embrace challenging roles as it will develop your leadership skills, and also apply to WCO professional development programmes. I have actually been encouraging many young officers, both men and women, to apply for WCO programmes and have offered guidance whenever I have been asked.

WCO: Outside of your work, do you have any interests or hobbies?

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: There is definitely one that comes to mind - my love of coffee. While Sri Lanka is well known for its tea, it also produces coffee, and a coffee culture is emerging. Being an nCEN Adviser provided me with an opportunity to travel in the region and taste different coffees. Last year, I enrolled on a barista course, attending training during weekends and evenings. I bought a small coffee machine for my home and love making coffee for my loved ones.

WCO: Thank you Rajitha for giving us a glimpse of your personal and professional life. We believe that through these kinds of open and honest conversations, we can support progress on gender equity.

Rajitha Kalhari Komangoda: Thank you. I feel honoured to participate in such an initiative.