



International Women’s Day Special

Vision: To be recognized as a world class regional Customs Organization that collaborates with regional and global partners to deliver high quality services and sustainable solutions to Member Administrations

OCEANIA CUSTOMS ORGANIZATION NEWSLETTER

OCO Celebrates Unsung Heroines In The Front Lines



the OCO and its members pay tribute to all women, and in particular those working in our Customs administrations who are part of the regional effort to keep our borders free of the coronavirus”, Mr. Jacob says. “Of the 14 countries that are still COVID-19 free, 11 are in the Pacific. Our Customs officers are at risk daily when processing incoming travelers and boarding ships that are bringing in cargo and we applaud them for their dedication and hard work at our borders.”

Mr. Jacob adds that most countries in the Pacific are fortunate to continue living relatively normal lives, as before the pandemic, with no restrictions in movement or large gatherings.

Suva, Fiji, 04 March 2021– Oceania Customs Organisation Chairperson, Mr. Salvador Jacob says the Pacific Islands States have benefited enormously from the contribution of women in Customs administrations, who like their male counterparts, are the unsung heroines in their front lines.

“Time has stood still in the Pacific- we may have experienced the economic shocks of the pandemic, but other than that, we have shops, schools, and offices open, and most importantly we can still meet and greet the Pacific way with hugs, kisses and handshakes, without fear of contracting the virus. This is possible because of effective Customs work, some of which is led by women,” Mr. Jacob said.

“On this 2021 International Day of Women,

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OUR MEMBERS





OCO is releasing a series, Pacific Women in Customs, which is a collection of stories of women nominated by their Customs administrations as part of its celebration of International Women’s Day.

“International Women’s Day is celebrated on March 8th, but we have chosen to dedicate the month of March to women in Customs,” OCO Head of Secretariat, Mr. Richard Brennan said. “It is part of our efforts to promote gender equality in what is a male-dominated industry and also in recognition of the UN Women theme for International Women’s Day, which is “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world.” One of the women featured in the Pacific Women in Customs series is Mrs. Matafeo Avalisa Viali-Fautua’alii, Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry of Revenue and Customs

in Samoa and is one of three female heads of Customs in the OCO member countries. “All Customs officers must be applauded for their work in keeping our borders safe,” Mrs. Viali-Fautua’alii said. “In many countries, COVID-19 has increased the workload of Customs officers who have also become quarantine officers to ensure incoming travelers are quarantined until they are proven to be free of the virus and allowed into communities. And we especially applaud our women, who have risen up to the challenge and stood by their male colleagues as equal counterparts responding to the call of duty of their nations.” The Pacific Women in Customs series starts on 8 March and can be read on the OCO website www.ocosec.org

In 2019, the OCO held its inaugural Change Management on Gender Equality workshop, which suggested there should be gender equality in all aspects of OCO’s work program. This suggestion was endorsed at the 2020 OCO Annual Conference. In 2020, OCO member countries were encouraged to celebrate International Women’s Day in their own administrations and to share their activities widely.

“I urge Pacific Islanders to remember and spare a thought for that grandmother, mother, daughter, sister, cousin who is working hard to keep our borders safe. Happy International Women’s Day,” Mr. Brennan urged.

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OCO Head of Secretariat, Mr. Brennan Addressing Guests and foreign delegates at the Webinar organized at Holiday Inn, Suva.

Avalisa's balancing act to keep Samoa safe



Samoa Ministry of Revenue & Customs, Chief Executive Officer, Mrs. Matafeo Avalisa Viali-Fautua'alii

Suva, Fiji, 08 March 2021 – In 2019, the OCO held its inaugural Change Management on Gender Equality workshop, which suggested there should be gender equality in all aspects of OCO's work program. This suggestion was endorsed at the 2020 OCO Annual Conference. In 2020, OCO member countries were encouraged to celebrate International Women's Day in their own administrations and to share their activities widely. This year, OCO is dedicating the month of March to our women. The Pacific Women in Customs Series is a collection of stories of women who are working in Customs in their various countries and we hope to inspire more women to join this field of work.

Matafeo Avalisa Viali-Fautua'alii has been at the helm of Samoa's Ministry of Customs and Revenue (MCR) for the fifth year now. Two decades ago, she started at the Ministry as a tax inspector. She is now the CEO and is one of three females that lead a customs administration in the Oceania region.

This is her story.

For the past five years, Avalisa's biggest challenge has been the overall volume and scope of work of her ministry.

But of course.

The mother of six masterminds revenue collection for the Samoan Government with 212 employees who work in the two departments that make up her Ministry – Customs Services and Inland Revenue Services.

With COVID-19, she needs to balance that role with keeping Samoa's borders safe from the virus.

"The degree of responsibilities in both departments/ – Customs Services and Inland Revenue Services are highly complex and because of the volume of work on a daily basis, I need to have an effective system in place to ensure that work is completed and on time," Avalisa says.

"However, it does not mean that I relax- I need to constantly monitor our activities."

Her journey

Avalisa pursued her tertiary studies in Fiji at the University of the South Pacific graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Management and Economics in 1992 and joined the Ministry as a tax inspector.

Two years later she was promoted to the senior assessor for Companies Income Tax Assessing Unit and by 1997, Avalisa was the Assistant Commissioner of Income Tax or Assistant CEO. During this period, she pursued and completed a Bachelor of Commerce in Accounting from the National University of Samoa. In the same period, she passed the Final Qualifying Exam of the Samoa Institute of Accountants ('SIA') and was admitted as a Chartered Accountant (CA) of the SIA.

Twenty years after joining the Ministry, Avalisa was promoted to Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Inland Revenue, a position she held until 2015 when she was promoted to Chief Executive Officer of the Ministry.

In her tenure as CEO, the Ministry has been able to achieve annual targets and milestones, as well as their commitments and obligations to various regional and international the two divisions, are affiliated to.

"Being members of regional organisations such as the Oceania Customs Organisation, World Customs Organization, and the Pacific Islands Tax Administration is beneficial as they offer capacity building opportunities for our staffs," she says.

"And this is important as I believe the ministry's workforce needs to be well qualified, upskilled and well trained, respectful but professional, and possess the much-required integrity to achieve our strategic directions and targets."

COVID-19

Samoa's State of Emergency restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way in which the ministry conducts its nor-

mal day-to-day operations. With a reduced number of employees on shifts at the airport for incoming repatriation and cargo flights and at the wharf for incoming vessels, there is more time for Customs staff to do targeted intelligence and investigation work.

This has resulted in the Border Operations special team with the assistance of the Joint K9 unit with the Samoa Police Services, intercepting an importation of illicit methamphetamine ('ice') and concentrated marijuana seeds with a street value of more than about US\$500k worth (i.e. about ST\$1.4million).

"The role of Customs has also changed during this pandemic," Avalisa says. "While we work with regional partners to combat transnational crimes such as the importation of illicit drugs and human trafficking, we also need to use the same resources to prevent COVID-19 from coming into our borders.

"During this pandemic, we have more staff attending virtual workshops, seminars and training during and after official working hours, depending on where the host organization is, and this is critical to keep our staff skilled and alert on global trends."

Family time

Like many working mothers, having a work-life balance is very important to Avalisa.

With husband, Sefo Fautua'alii they are parents to five sons and a daughter aged between 27 years and nine years.

Being of the Laulii and Falefa villages' Catholic congregation has also allowed her to cope with the rigorous life of being a wife, mother and CEO.

"My Christian values and principles complement my work ethics," she said. "And I would not be able to achieve all these without the support of my husband and family. My family and the church have been my pillars of strength, helping me overcome the many challenges of this position and enabling me to lead and manage the Samoa Ministry of Customs and Revenue effectively and efficiently."

Avalisa credits her accomplishments to God.

"Seek God earnestly, and we shall find him in everything that we do," she adds.

Barbara's Journey from a Dancer to a Captain



Captain Barbara Tayama of Guam Customs and Quarantine Agency

Suva, Fiji, 15 March 2021 – Captain Barbara C. Tayama is the operations supervisor of the Logistics and Support Division of the Guam Customs and Quarantine Agency. As a young person, she loved to dance and performed in various places in Guam and even in the United States at the Disneyland in Anaheim, California, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., and the Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, New York. Captain Barbara holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice, a former member of the Guam National Guard Marathon, and is also the Law Office Superintendent in her military capacity. She also values the importance of volunteerism and gives back to her community as a lector at her parish and advocate for victims of abuse with a non-profit organization. This is the story of the mother of one and blessed soon-to-be grandmother this month.

Who is Captain Barbara?

I am a mother, daughter, sister, friend, and colleague. I can't cook. But I can furnish a meal. I love to run. And the chances are, if there is a 5K event going on this weekend in Guam, we are likely to meet up. I love to spin. And, that is at the gym. I love to ride my Harley. I love yoga. I can swim. But I don't. I am grateful for each day I am given, and I can still learn something new every day.

Her early years

When I was young, my form of self-expression was dance. I loved to dance.

And, I had all the best moves. So much so, that I auditioned for the SKIP Dance Troupe and made it. I made it. I was on top of the world and performing at the Liberation Carnival, the Agaña Shopping Center, and the premier performing arts center on Guam at the time, the University of Guam Fine Arts Theater.

Through the mentorship of some wonderful role models, I traveled to the United States and performed as a goodwill ambassador for Guam. I danced at Disneyland in Anaheim California, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C., and the Rockefeller Plaza in New York City, New York.

My dear Uncle Nicky, may he rest in peace, once told me that when I grew up, I was going to be a stripper. It was a horrifying thought for someone like me. In retrospect, however, I think he was paying me a compliment.

And, I can recall that I always had a competitive streak. When I turned 10, at my birthday party, I worked so hard and brought out all the battle guns for the balloon dance competition. It was all out. All divisions. No rules. Just one winner. I had to win. And I did! If I ever lost, for example, a game of checkers or hop-scotch or any game of skill, I would cry. It was total

devastation. I just had to win.

Barbara on fire

I hated my name. Barbara. It was just plain Barbara, no Barbara Ann or Barbara Sue or even Barbara Jean. My mom's last name had to be my own middle name. When I was young, I once told another girl that my name was Sandra. She came up to my parents, asking for me only to be caught that I lied about my name. What was it that I did not like about my birth name at a tender age of 8? Maybe it was that I was named after a patron saint. I was born on her feast day in December. And that sparked no interest or appreciation from me at the time. But then, one magical day in religion class, I was given homework to find out how I got my name. And my research revealed that Barbara, Santa Barbara, is not only a local catholic school, but she is the most popular patron saint invoked against thunder, lightning and fire. Little did I know, that I was on fire since the day I was born!

What makes you spin?

I go to the gym and get on the stationary bike, which has a knob and you can increase the tension. The amount of tension you put in determines the amount of effort you will have to exert, in order to tear up your muscles. So, you've got to tear it down, like a failure, only to build it back up. And, that's what makes one stronger. This spin class is very much like our lives. This "tension" is an outside force that builds muscle and endurance. The amount of time you spend under resistance helps you to gain strength. The heavier the resistance, the stronger the muscle you can build. The bigger the challenge, the bigger the opportunity. You must keep the muscle under tension, until the feeling of muscle failure, so your muscle gets tom down, in order to rebuild itself. After this "so-called" failure, you bounce back and you come back stronger. Through life's failures, you become stronger and wiser. As you get stronger, you must take on more challenging forms of resistance.

Advice to women

As the saying goes, behind every successful woman is a tribe of other successful women, who have her back. You are the faces of empowerment. Lots of people can have passion. You don't have to be passionate about the same things. But living a full life is about finding your passion. Turning your passion into action can make a difference in your life, which in turn, affects the lives around you.

I am a firm believer, that we can create change if we care enough about something. It can start with something as simple as our daily conversations. We can practice becoming more conscious of the words we speak. We can speak with love, encouragement, understanding, and genuine concern. We can create change by shifting negative conversations to positive ones. If enough of us care, we can change the course of our lives. Everyone has the potential to reach. We all have different potential. But it is still potential. And we all have it. We can change the world if we begin with ourselves. If we can remember that every opportunity, we have with one another, is a chance to present someone with a step in helping them to reach their full potential. It

is helpful to focus more on the individual than yourself. together working as one team!

And by this, you will help contribute to their full potential. It costs nothing. And the benefits far outweigh the risks. Turn your vision into action. What sort of thing do you love and are passionate about? How would your vision make a difference in the world? That is the recipe for your empowerment.

Follow your heart, with vision and action. And, you will find your purpose in life. It's quite simple. Get out there and WAVE - **Women A Voice of Empowerment**.

Captain Barbara C Tayama manages all sections within the division that includes the Resource Management Office, Property Evidence & Custodial Office, Fines, Fees, & Forfeiture, Training & Development, and the Research & Development Sections'. She has been described as being more than an asset to the division-she is the glue that brings the sections to-



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Catherine's Positivity Conquers Challenges



Catherine Mori , FSM

Suva, Fiji, 25 March 2021. Catherine Mori is the oldest female employee in the Customs and Tax Administration in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). And she may just well be the oldest female employee in the Department of FSM Finance, the jurisdiction under which her institution comes under. Beginning her career as a Revenue Officer III with the Revenue and Tax Division in 1990, Catherine has witnessed numerous developments over the years. A major one was the merger of the Revenue and Customs divisions in 1998, her eighth year on the job. To her, a “big adjustment” was inevitable during that corporate transition. No less, a woman in a commonly-perceived male-dominated occupational field, and in a deeply-rooted cultural nation. But no mountain has been too high to scale for Catherine, who was promoted to Deputy Assistant Secretary in the field office in Chuuk State, FSM – a position she has held since 2007 to date, and again the only female employee in that role.

This is her story.

The beginning

Catherine began her career in the tax domain in 1990.

She started as an auditor with the Revenue and Tax Division, but she held the position of a Revenue Officer III. And in that capacity alone, she was required to perform various tax-related functions.

As a Revenue Officer III, Catherine had had to assist customers with their tax returns, input tax roll, and also input income tax, and transmit these to the headquarters in Pohnpei.

She was also tasked to assist customers

with their import transactions, and carry out daily bank deposits, amid other duties. In December later this year, Catherine will have completed 31 years of service with the organisation.

“I am the oldest female on this job and maybe also in the Department of FSM Finance,” she says.

The merge

At the time Catherine joined the Revenue and Tax Division, the institution operated separately from the Customs Division. And in 1998, the two institutions merged to form the Customs and Tax Administration under the Department of FSM Finance. During that transition, employees of both institutions had to undergo cross trainings in areas of tax revenue and customs.

“That year was a big adjustment for me,” Catherine recalls.

The merge meant that aside from her already-hectic work schedule, she also had to carry out an additional role of a Customs official at the island nation’s port of entries. Underpinned by the lack of manpower, Catherine had had to leave her office work aside and attend to inspection and clearance duties, that of cargos at the airport, the dock and or at the post office. And to ensure efficiency in productivity, she says she has had to be patient in all areas of her responsibilities.

The leader

Seventeen years of service and commitment with the Customs and Tax Administration paid off for Catherine. In 2007, she was promoted to the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary in the administration’s field office in Chuuk State, Micronesia. Chuuk State is the most populous of the four States in the FSM – than Pohnpei, Yap and Kosrae – which according to the April census of 2010 recorded some 48,654 inhabitants.

As the Deputy Assistant Secretary, Catherine now plays a more managerial role. She oversees the overall operation of her unit that includes human resources, revenue and customs collection.

“My duties now include overseeing the work of my employees, making sure the post office, the airport as well as the ship port are attained well and cleared. I do monthly reports on all areas of both cus-

toms and revenue collections, monthly reports on PC Trade and awareness in the field office.”

She also has to ensure that deposits of collections are maintained and sent to the central office in Pohnpei daily.

Embracing cultural challenges

Catherine openly declares her love for what she does and her positive approach to the challenges she faces. But she notes the challenge of conscience between the matter of gender in the workplace and her present cultural landscape.

“I have enjoyed my job all my life, learning to get along with others, learning how to communicate, and experiencing new ideas. “But overall, my challenge on the job is being the only woman in the position. “In Chuuk, Micronesia, males are mostly the heads in all departments. “It was hard for me to speak up, and it was not because I was scared but it is because of our respect for men.”

And it is because of their culture in Micronesia, especially for Chuuk State, that they are still adjusting to the modern way of life.

“Nowadays, because people go out of FSM to the United States (of America) or Hawai’i, they have come a long way to understand that women do not only have a place at home but they also have a place in departments and offices.

“Today, I am very happy with my job. I feel free working among many males on the job and getting acquainted with my colleagues.

“I gain more experience working with the male on the job. It helps me to gain more experience in the work I do.”

She adds this has also helped her family understand and support her in her work.

COVID-19

This pandemic has adversely impacted the world in many ways, largely on human lives lost and global economic collapses.

Again, Catherine capitalises on her natural ability to take a positive approach and look on the bright side.

Her work schedule has changed significantly, in particular with limited flights and cargo ships.

“For me, this means I have more time to rest and more time to spend with the family. It has helped me to relax and enjoy life.”

Dr. Clarke Uses Vast Global Experience in Nauru



Dr. Jennifer Clarke, Head of Nauru Customs

Suva, Fiji, 16 March 2021 – Dr. Jennifer Clarke is a UK-trained academician, practitioner, and researcher of development administration with over 20 years of practical experience in institutional strengthening and capacity building. She is currently the head of Nauru Customs Service and is one of the three female heads of Customs in OCO membership of 23.

Her Journey

Jennifer was awarded her Ph.D. in International Development by the University of Birmingham, U.K., and completed her Masters in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management at the London School of Economics, U.K. Main areas of focus during her doctoral study included Governance, Public Policy, Project Finance, and Economic Analysis, and the Political Economy of Poverty Reduction and Development.

Before joining Nauru Customs, Jennifer has worked in both developed and developing countries in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and the Americas on projects funded by international donors (World Bank, the European Union, the U.K. Department for International Development, AusAid, and the

Inter-American Development Bank), focusing on governance and anti-corruption, public financial management, public sector modernization, customs reform and modernization, and trade enhancement for enabling business environments.

On such projects, she served in the roles of Chief Technical Adviser, Team Leader, Capacity Development Specialist; Change Management Adviser; as well as Associate Professor.

“I am an avid self-starter and I am a committed, resourceful and flexible individual. I have a very meticulous and methodological approach to my

work,” she says.

Jennifer has served in long-term technical advisory roles to various Customs administrations in Latin America and the Caribbean and also Africa. The opportunity to serve in an ‘in-line’ role with more authority and responsibility for decision making and the ability this afforded for fuller control over the achievement of results was part of the reason which prompted her to apply for the Deputy Secretary position. Working with the Nauru Customs Service, she says, has been a rewarding experience. She has had the opportunity to work with a young team of open-minded individuals that are willing to embrace reforms and to implement the type of both incremental and large-scale transformational changes needed for a more modern, responsive Customs Service.

A Humanitarian

Outside of the work environment, Jennifer is involved in humanitarian work and is currently working towards the establishment of a foundation in Barbados for gifted and talented children from underprivileged backgrounds, focusing on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics)

education for the achievement of SDGs. She is also working in Nauru on an initiative focusing on women in trade and women’s economic empowerment.

As a female Consultant who has worked in a number of foreign jurisdictions with differing cultural views, Jennifer cites one main and ongoing challenge as the issue of gender equality.

“It is not enough for women to just have a seat at the table; the real issue is for their voices to be heard,” she says. “Certain behaviors, certain statements, sometimes even omissions to act in certain situations send strong signals of people’s thought processes. Overcoming such a challenge involves having confidence, being able to well articulate one’s position, and equally important keeping abreast and well informed of the latest developments in thinking on various issues, in particular those relating to one’s operating environment.”

She says maintaining a steady composure in the face of lack of appreciation of diversity and the contributions which women are capable of making, not only augers well for one’s personal wellbeing, it also allows one to demonstrate behaviors that can be role modeled by emerging female leaders.

“Placing God at the center, my Christian values, upbringing, and a strong family support network back in Barbados makes it easier for me to thrive living alone in Nauru, and to maintain the type of focus needed to effectively contribute to the development of similar small island nations,” she says.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic, in Jennifer’s view, has dramatically altered the way in which people think and work, both individually, and as a collective.

“The pandemic has brought even more starkly to the fore the need for more joined-up government by government agencies working together in the fight against the coronavirus; as well as the need for Customs to work with counterpart border agencies to devise strategies so as to realize a more coordinated approach to the management of increasingly porous borders.”

Trendsetter Daphney Manages OCO Operations



OCO Operations Manager, Mrs. Irma Daphney Stone

Suva, Fiji, 10 March 2021 – Irma Daphney Stone is a trendsetter. She began her career as a development accountant in her home country in Tonga in 1994, a time when business graduates in the kingdom were rare. She became the first female chief executive officer of the Ministry of Revenue and Customs in 2012, at that time she was one of a handful of females holding leadership positions in either customs or taxation in the Pacific. She is now the Operations Manager at the Oceania Customs Organisation.

This is her story.

Like many career women, Daphney has had to balance her professional and personal life.

She gave up a promising career to follow her husband, Pr. Dr. Ronald Stone as he either went for studies or for work to Fiji and the Philippines.

But the mother of three has no regrets. With the firm belief that a secure family life guarantees a secure professional life, she used the opportunities to further her experiences and knowledge.

Such as working towards a PhD degree in the Philippines and employment with organizations like the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, the University of the South Pacific and the South Pacific Tourism Organisation. “It’s always a hard decision to resign but we prayed about every decision we had to make, and it has always worked out in the end,” Daphney says.

Her career

Her early stint with the Ministry of Finance in Tonga set the foundation for Daphney and helped her in her various roles as a servant of the Pacific.

She managed World Bank projects in the country, as well as the government debt and when she was promoted to CEO of the Ministry of Revenue and Customs, she already had stints as the chief internal auditor and deputy secretary of investments.

“One of my roles was inspecting government projects such as building or constructions projects, at the time it was rare for females to be in such roles but I did not see it as an obstacle or felt out of place,” Daphney says.

As CEO of the Ministry of Revenue and Customs, Daphney led the government revenue policy committee that first introduced revenue measures on products that negatively impacted on health, including food and tobacco. In her tenure, the Ministry’s remuneration grading structure was aligned with the whole of Government and she also convinced the government to self-fund its customs management system upgrade.

Daphney also chaired the OCO Heads of Customs Meeting in 2013, where critical decisions on the future of the organization were made.

“It’s always important to see challenges as opportunities,” she says. “I have experienced these over the years, and I have no regrets.”

Challenges for Women in Customs

As a former CEO of the Ministry of Revenue and Customs in Tonga, Daphney has seen the challenges faced by women customs officers.

“I think one of the important challenges is balancing culture with the roles and duties of customs officers. For example in Tonga, Customs officers are required to climb up fuel tanks, board ships, and conduct inspections. On the other hand, women are required to wear the traditional sulu, and this becomes challenging for women customs officers who will need to wear comfortable non-traditional clothing to conduct their duties,” Daphne says.

In her work as the Operations Manager at OCO- a role she took up in 2019, Daphney

has been supportive of gender equality.

In 2019, the OCO held its inaugural Change Management on Gender Equality workshop, which suggested there should be gender equality on all aspects of OCO’s work programs.

“We are working in challenging times due to the impacts of COVID-19. Most of our OCO members are struggling to collect revenue and at the same time keep our borders safe from being infiltrated with illicit drugs, contrabands, and COVID-19.

“My role is to ensure that our members are being aptly supported through our programs and more importantly that our female customs officers who are outnumbered in every administration in the Pacific are provided the same opportunities as male colleagues to improve their knowledge and skills.”

With the closure of borders, OCO like all organisations across the world is offering online training, webinars to its 23 members.

In February, more than 80 officers from 17 countries in the region began a 10-month online training aimed at equipping them with skills to address daily challenges and those brought on by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The training delivered by the Centre for Customs and Excise Studies, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, and the Oceania Customs Organisation will end in November and leads to a Certificate III in Regional Customs Administrations. It’s the largest training, in terms of numbers, ever conducted by the OCO. It is also a stepping stone for trainees to continue to tertiary studies in Customs.

“We have a bit of gender inequality there as two-thirds of the trainees are women,” Daphney says. “But if we look at the bigger picture where there are lesser women in Customs administrations, it is justified to train our female Customs officers to be equally capable as their male counterparts.”

As a Pacific islander serving the region, Daphney has advice on how to be successful.

“Always commit to doing your best in what you do and for everything you do, you must have a spiritual connection to the one above. True commitment is words in action.”

Jayvina shares message of well-being through time management



Jayvina Victus, FSM

Suva, Fiji, 23 March 2021 – Jayvina Victus is a Customs and Revenue Officer IV with the Customs and Tax Administration under the Department of FSM Finance. In the 13 years of her career as a revenue officer and in her present role, she has grown both professionally and personally. She has had to take the bull by the horns in the most unexpected of circumstances, and backing down obviously was not an option. Those challenges presented new opportunities, and have taught her a valuable life lesson she now heeds on a daily basis to help her with work and wellbeing.

This is her story

A servant of the State and a mother, Jayvina Victus deserves mention and commendation as the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO) dedicates this year's International Women's Day to Pacific women working in Customs.

Thirteen years in the Federated States of Micronesia's Customs and Tax Administration, Jayvina has dutifully carried out the responsibilities required of her as a revenue agent. At that, the challenge of timely productivity has been one of her major difficulty, performing numerous tasks all with a daily deadline with very limited manpower.

Jayvina joined Customs and Tax Administration in FSM as a Revenue Agent I in 2009. In 2013, she was promoted to the position of Revenue Officer III. And following the reclassification of her job title in 2018, she then became the Customs and Revenue

Officer IV, the position she holds today.

As Customs and Revenue Officer IV

Jayvina joined the organisation 11 years after the merger between the Revenue and Tax Division and the Customs Division – now the Customs and Tax Administration under the Department of FSM Finance.

In her present role as the Customs and Revenue Officer IV, her job demands assurance that officers in the unit perform all duties and responsibilities accurately, efficiently, and in accordance with FSM Customs and Tax laws and regulations.

"I have to ensure taxes such as import tax, business gross revenue tax, wages and salary tax are collected in a timely manner," Jayvina says.

She updates the tax roll, and inputs income tax for the process of annual tax refunds. She updates and collects delinquent accounts, and also issues demands for filing and payments of taxes.

Because Jayvina is also the Customs officer, she carries out clearance and inspections of passengers and shipments, air cargo and mails at the airport, dock, and post office. Before close of business daily, she also does collections and deposited in the bank the same day.

Time management

Jayvina particularly recalls the year 2013 to be the most challenging one professionally for her.

Although the two divisions had already merged, the duties and responsibilities of the two offices, however, were performed separately. At that time, there were only two staff members, including Jayvina, who looked after revenue and tax responsibilities. Then the most unexpected happened – her only workmate resigned on medical grounds. She recalls having to carry out the unit's responsibilities solo.

"After my colleague resigned due to medical issues, I was responsible for everything, from the processing of tax refund to receiving and receipting of quarterly taxes, to issuing of demands for noncompliance. "It was very overwhelming."

And imaginably so.

It was around then that Jayvina discovered

her biggest nemesis – time management. Daily tasks were completed but not always on time. She identified time management as her greatest daily challenge. Besides attending internal trainings on time management facilitated by Customs and Tax, she switched into self-help mode and browsed online to find easier and updated tools of staying ahead with work while keeping time in check.

"I found out a lot about time management skills. It was a big help and I was able to get things circulated little by little." Jayvina's work scale tipped a little the following year when a new revenue agent was recruited.

"We managed to get by but we still needed more help."

In 2018, following the re-association of job titles, duties and responsibilities, work has become more "enjoyable and less stressful".

Learning to stop and rest

After acquiring skills on how to manage her time, Jayvina has also unlocked the door to something she never gave much thought to – well-being. She now commits to having 'me time' to replenish and rejuvenate, to perform better every time.

"Overcoming the challenge (of time management) made me feel confident as an officer, also as a woman and a mother.

"I now have time managed at work, at home and all around. It doesn't just help me with getting things done accurately and on time but it also helps me with my health.

"Once the time to rest hits, I just immediately stop what I'm doing and I just rest."

COVID-19

This viral pandemic and subsequent widespread repercussion has translated into shutdowns of businesses – and job losses in the process, affected regional and international trade, movement of goods and services, and largely travel, which in a natural turn hit tourism big.

Despite all, it only meant that for Jayvina and her colleagues, they had to work twice as hard.

"We had to work extra hard to maintain or to reach our goals every fiscal year. And surprisingly we exceed the given targets."

Joline Manages Palau Customs' Digital



Joline Spesungel, Palau

Suva, Fiji, 29 March, 2021. Palau's Bureau of Customs and Border Protection relies on Joline Spesungel for any IT related work. Joline has been working for the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection for the last 21 years. She is now in charge of the IT section. Joline is one of those featured in the OCO/PACNEWS Pacific Women in Customs series.

Times are changing in Palau, says Joline. She meant that more women are now choosing to work and earn an income then it was some time ago. When Joline started her career with Palau Customs, she was one of the few women specialising in information technology.

"I was very shy at first because at that time people thought only boys should be doing that kind of work. I would often get embarrassed if I had to, get under the table to fix network cables with all men around me or when there were customers around. But I got used to it and I am no longer shy."

On a routine day, Joline starts her morning fixing computers, checking the network and ensuring that Palau Customs is online and functioning.

Joline is also given duties that are not part of her role such as providing Customs statistics for national planning or for stake-

holders to use; revenue audits and reconciliation of Customs revenue and national revenue. She also trains stakeholders on the use of Customs systems.

It is for this reason she has been often referred to as an example of a good role model. She has also been described as "highly dependable and productive in terms of assisting with daily office operations and regulatory support. She is passionate about her work and requires no supervision."

COVID-19

Palau is one of the 12 countries in the world that is still COVID-19 free.

"There has not been much change except that we only have one cargo flight per week now. Otherwise, there has not been much change at Palau Customs. We are getting almost the same volume of trade as before the pandemic."

But that does not mean that Palau Customs or in this case Joline has not prepared, in the event they do have a case.

Joline has an online electronic Customs clearance process that will be activated to minimize physical contact.

"When I started work, it was a bit challenging as I was in a male-dominated field but I didn't let it get to me, I worked harder."

The mother of three has an advice to women- "Don't limit your challenges, Challenge your limit"

IWD 2021 campaign theme: #ChooseToChallenge

A challenged world is an alert world. Individually, we're all responsible for our own thoughts and actions - all day, every day.

We can all choose to challenge and call out gender bias and inequality. We can all choose to seek out and celebrate women's achievements. Collectively, we can all help create an inclusive world.

*From challenge comes change, so let's all **choose to challenge**.*

Source: <https://www.internationalwomensday.com>

Laisa leads FRCS' Air Cargo team in Nadi



Laisa Naivalurua, FRCS

Suva, Fiji, 19 March, 2021 – *Criminals trying to infiltrate borders with illicit drugs and contrabands is real. In Fiji and across the globe, one of the key roles of Customs administrations such as the Fiji Revenue and Customs Services is to stop criminals and arrest this illegal trades. In Nadi, one of our international ports because of the Nadi International Airport, Principal Customs Officer, Laisa Naivalurua heads a team that are really intelligence officers who try and intercept criminals or illegal cargoes. A handful of women have been given this responsibility. OCO/PACNEWS Pacific Women in Customs interviewed Laisa of her experience as a woman in a male dominated industry.*

The journey

Laisa was already on her eighth year as an Intelligence Analyst at the Fiji Financial Intelligence Unit (FFIU), when a friend told her of a Customs vacancy in Nadi.

That was in 2015. Coincidentally, she was searching for jobs in Nadi, where her husband was already working.

"I was surprised to be offered the job but very thankful because it was in a field that I am passionate about, which is in the intelligence space and I also was still able to serve my country in the public sector.

"Working at Customs has been rewarding in that there are so many technical aspects and risks that you get to learn along the way. I think there is that general misconception that Customs work is just about clearing goods but it is not as simple as that. In addition to this, there are many stakeholders that we as Customs officers have to interact with so there is always the opportunity to build our communication skills."

Current responsibilities

Laisa has been based at FRCS' Air Cargo Control Unit in Nadi since January this year. The Air Cargo Control Unit is currently in its pilot

phase and comes under the National Border Control Targeting Center in Suva.

"I am responsible for the daily operations of the Unit in Nadi with its core role of profiling and targeting high risk air cargo consignments before these consignments arrive into Nadi. This includes mitigating border security risks such as illicit drugs, arms and ammunition and also revenue risks such as undeclared dutiable goods and tariff misclassification."

Challenges in a male dominated industry

"The challenge we face as women is mainly due to stereotypes about women's lack of ability, aspirations and the traditional roles of women which causes that assumption that women cannot successfully contribute to the workforce. With these kinds of assumptions, women can be overlooked for career development opportunities and may not be taken seriously in the workplace.

"As a result women are under more pressure to perform to prove these stereotypes wrong and this can have a negative impact on their physical and emotional health. I have experienced some of this stereotypical thinking but I have been fortunate enough to learn from role models in my family and in my career who have taught me to persevere and rise above such obstacles in life.

"Whilst there are more women in Customs now, there is still a need for more women in leadership positions to bring greater diversity in setting the strategic direction of this field of work."

Balancing work and personal lives

This is probably the greatest challenge, Laisa believes, a woman in the workforce faces where she has to balance work with the demands of a personal life.

"Despite your work status, there is always that expectation on women to still manage the affairs at home. It causes stress in most career women especially when you have children who are at a younger age.

"I have been married for eight years and I have three girls aged between one and eight years. But thankfully I have been blessed with trusted helpers that take care of my children when I am at work and I know this is hard to find. I believe it is also my faith in God who allows me that work-life balance because I believe it's not something that we can do on our own strength."

Laisa always had the support of her parents in the pursuit of her career, and has tried to

honor them with that – not only because of their expectations but because of the sacrifices they made for her and her education.

"I am blessed with great role models in my family that have played a big part in shaping my work ethic and commitment. I am also blessed to be married to a very supportive and understanding husband. He also has a demanding career but he always manages to step in whether it is with moral support or with managing the home.

"My husband and I grew up in the Baptist Church which set the foundation in our Christian beliefs and as we started our own careers and our own family, we appreciated the fellowship with our church family in keeping us grounded and reminding us to always be thankful despite the challenges."

Advice to women

"We all have a calling in life and once you do understand what yours is, pursue it and own it! If you do get distracted or lose your way, don't let that discourage you. What matters is how you will finish. As women, let us build our networks and influence the next generation to break the stereotypes of women in the workforce. We can do this by standing up for each other and advocating not for special treatment but for a more gender inclusive workforce across the Pacific. Each one of us can bring about that change in our own unique ways."

Challenges of COVID-19

"The challenges we face as a customs officer during this pandemic was mainly around changing the way we would normally work and ensuring we did our part in supporting government's efforts in fighting the pandemic. "This included wearing proper protective equipment such as hand gloves and face masks, downloading the CARE Fiji App and enquiring with customers whether they had this App as well on their mobile phones. It was an additional responsibility that we had to embrace as frontline officers.

"COVID-19 has also challenged us to strengthen our risk assessment processes so that there is a more streamlined approach on physical interventions. We also had to move meetings and trainings to the virtual space which has been challenging because Customs work is practical and hands-on. Nevertheless, I have seen the Customs community overcome these challenges by managing the changes and sharing experiences across jurisdictions to build a more resilient and united workforce."

Laisiana makes footprints in the Oceania Region



Laisiana Tugaga, *Oceania Customs Organisation Secretariat*

Suva, Fiji, 1 March 2021 – *Laisiana Tugaga is the Trade and Revenue Adviser at the Oceania Customs Secretariat. A Fijian national, her career has spanned over two decades with 15 years spent in trade and customs. She is one of those women who are making footprints in Customs in the Oceania region and yet are modest about their achievements. This is her story.*

Laisiana joined the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service (FRCS) 22 years ago as a young economics graduate and at a time when there were not many women customs officers.

The mother of three boys is now the go to person for the OCO member countries when they need technical advice and assistance on trade facilitation and revenue measures.

“One of the key aspects of my role is providing training to Customs officers in the region and assisting them to meet international customs standards,” she says. “Customs administrations play such a critical role in our economies in the Pacific, ensuring not only that they expedite border processes but also that they implement controls that secure revenue and protect our societies. “I see my role as helping OCO member countries achieve these goals whether through training, improving legislation and policies and developing their

capacities to respond to these roles.”

Early years

My inspiration has always been my late mother. She raised five children on her own when my dad passed away when I was only a year old, the youngest in the family. And through her perseverance, hard work and love, I learnt that I can do anything if I work hard for it. Laisiana also gives credit to her 11 year-experience in FRCS as the foundation for her career in the Oceania region. While she started as a Customs officer, she was eventually promoted as Economic Policy Officer and Manager International Relations. Her first regional stint was with the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) in Port Villa, Vanuatu where she spent four and a half years before she joined OCO in December 2016.

“As I reflect on my early career days, I have had some good mentors, two of them were males who were willing to share skills and knowledge and guided me through a pathway for personal and career development and I am so grateful for that,” she says.

“My work has also provided many opportunities to network with other women working in the customs area and through those networks, we are able to share experiences and better understand gender issues and challenges of their current work environment. “Some of the barriers they face are not specific to customs but a broader cultural mindset issues that will take time to improve.

“Nonetheless, there is an increasing number of women in customs now, and I believe they can affect significant and positive changes in their administrations.”

PACER-Plus

From 2017 to 2019, Laisiana managed a project to help OCO members who are parties to PACER Plus to meet their obligations under the Agreement.

Through this work, she was able to see firsthand the challenges of small island economies.

“One of the positive outcomes from this project was the partnership with members to have a sustainable capacity building program through the Train the Trainer Pro-

gram; where we train officers who will be able to provide training in their various Customs administrations,” Laisiana says.

An important project which Laisiana has been part of is the development of the Pacific Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (PACHS) to assist members who had yet to implement the World Customs Organization Harmonised System. The project also involved Customs guidelines for PACER Plus parties and additional resources to assist them in implementing the agreement.

“We also have had to take a gender lens in our activities and that is a challenge for male-dominated organisations like Customs,” she says.

“At the end of the project, I am pleased that of the beneficiaries about 41 per cent of them were females.

Challenges of a working mother

“As a female, a challenge that I face is balancing work with home,” she says. “I am a wife and a mother to three boys and trying to balance that with work demands is not easy at times.”

While she is grateful for the support of her husband and family, Laisiana says the most important thing in her life is her faith in God.

“As I look back over the years, it is God’s grace that has sustained me. I believe that God gives me the vision, direction, and creativity to do my work. That is why I love what I do.”

COVID-19 challenges

“Since March 2020 my work has completely changed moving from what used to be face-to-face to virtual meetings and it’s more challenging in the Pacific with internet connectivity issues. I have had to learn some new skills navigating through the various platforms such as Zoom, MS Teams and WebEx.

“However, I am finding that it is not only cost effective; it has allowed us to deliver training to more participants than the traditional training model.”

But most of all, she is grateful that the pandemic has allowed more family time and she loves that.

“LA REINA” Of CNMI Customs



Special Assistant, CNMI Customs, Lt.
Lareina C. Camacho

Suva, Fiji, 09 March 2021 – Lieutenant Lareina Camacho is one of the 32 percent of women who work for the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands Customs (CNMI) after joining in 2017. She is the special assistant to the director at the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands Customs Department.

This is her story.

In Spanish, “La Reina” means the queen. To some extent, Lareina or “Reina” as she is commonly known plays the role of a queen- she has to ensure that CNMI Customs speaks the same “language”, that all customs officers understand and enforce customs laws and procedures uniformly.

“I rarely have a typical day at CNMI Customs, so accomplishing each day’s set of challenges is fulfilling,” Reina says. Her daily responsibilities range from coordinating and developing training for customs personnel, preparing correspondences, organizing data, developing reports, strategic plans, and responding to stakeholder inquiries and concerns.

“I also serve as the point of contact or public information officer and assist other government agencies on customs-related inquiries. With the onset of COVID19 in the CNMI, I am also responsible for procuring and distributing personnel protective equipment and supplies, as well as overseeing the processing of requisitions, purchase orders, and contracts.”

Her journey

Reina joined CNMI Customs in December and was commissioned the rank of Lieutenant. Before joining CNMI Customs, Reina was the manager for the Pesticides and Storage Tank Branch at the Bureau of Environmental and Coastal Quality for more than ten years, responsible for supervising the inspections and compliance

of regulated facilities pertaining to fuel tanks and pesticide use, sale, or import.

Prior to this, she served as the special assistant to the president at the Northern Marianas College.

A graduate of Seattle University, Seattle, Washington with a Bachelor of Arts in Public Administration in 1998, Reina is very much a public servant of the NMI, having served and continues to remain active in various private and public organizations.

“Leadership styles vary greatly and I work best when I am guided and allowed flexibility. When an opportunity to work for Customs was presented, I was eager to engage in a new field with new challenges and networking,” she says.

Though in a male-dominated industry, Reina believes women bring more value to the organization.

“Collectively our work ethic is greater. Women have a better understanding and implementation of time management and are more productive in order to be considered for promotions. I would describe my work ethic as reliable and engaging,” she says.

“When asked to perform a task, I do so willingly. I enjoy my work and I like to be productive. One of the CNMI Customs’ core values is Integrity. I truly embrace the philosophy of doing the right thing even when no one is observing. Responsibility and integrity are virtues that I hope I’m passing on to my son and daughter through my daily actions and conversations,” she adds.

Reina also assists the director in implementing programs consistent with the World Customs Organization (WCO) as well as Oceania Customs Organization (OCO) programs to ensure CNMI Customs complies with international standards.

“I am still trying to facilitate change within the division in order to improve efficiency,” she says.

“The process has been slow-moving, however, each week, we are making progress. The changes include building electronic files in order to establish databases; ensuring the proper recording of useful data in order to apply for grant funding, ensuring officers implement objectives and lessons from training events.

Since COVID-19, Reina’s responsibilities have expanded to providing personal protective equipment gear, and uniforms for CNMI Customs officers.

“The workload or tasks alone have not impacted my work life, rather it has been

the near-elimination of social interactions,” she says.

“The in-person meetings have reduced drastically and I estimate that 90 percent are conducted online. Wearing a mask (face covering) at the office, all day, all week is not comfortable; but, we do so because we want to ensure safety for our own selves and co-workers and it is also required by the U.S. Center for Disease Control.

“There are always lessons to learn from any experience and taking the time to reflect is important. I like to ask myself, “what did I accomplish today?”

“This is how I find meaning and purpose in my life, personally and professionally.”

On the home front, Reina has two beautiful children, Reef (6 years) and Mayumi (4 years) who keep her busy as well.

As much as she is committed to her work with CNMI Customs, Reina still finds time to be involved in the community. This year, she was nominated as a Parent Leader in her daughter’s school for her engagement and participation in school activities.

As a nominee, she is an advocate for the health, safety, and welfare of CNMI children and families.

In the last decade, Reina has also been part of the Marianas March Against Cancer, the signature fundraising event of the Commonwealth Cancer Association.

She has served in various officer capacities in the Rotary Club of Saipan and 13th Saipan & Northern Islands Municipal Council from 2015-2017 and she was re-elected as the Chairperson for the Northern Marianas Coalition Against Domestic & Sexual Violence, anti-domestic violence and sexual assault organization with a mission to further the movement to end violence in the CNMI.

Future aspirations

“By 2025, my aspiration for CNMI Customs is to streamline efficiency through the reduction of paper-use by 50 percent and increase electronic filings and payments and increase capacity by coordinating a minimum of 120 hours of training for every officer pertaining to risk management, federal and state policy and regulation changes, and intellectual property rights. In the meantime, I am focused on developing growth mindsets, starting with supervisors, so that I have their support and cooperation to ensure all personnel are on board with the proposals of change.”

Maria leads an all women team in Cook Islands Customs Services



Maria Matua Ioane, Cook Islands

Suva, Fiji, 29 March 2021. *The Cook Islands Customs Services (CICS) Trade and Revenue Assurance Section is an all women team. The seven-member team manages client services as well as trade and revenue assurance. Heading the team is Senior Customs Officer, Maria Matua Ioane who joined the service fresh out of college as an 18-year-old in 2004. Maria has been nominated by the CICS to feature in the OCO/PACNEWS Women in Customs Series.*

Juggling life

Maria is your typical vivacious happy go lucky Cook Islander that unsurprisingly loves her country, culture, food as well as singing and dancing.

Apart from work commitments, the mother of two is also heavily involved in her children's school, church, and community. She manages well now, but in the past, the juggle to struggle with work and her personal commitments had at one time took its toll on her.

"I tried to shoulder everything, taking on all the responsibilities for my family, home, school, church, community and sports. I tried to have time for everything."

Maria's normal day then would, apart from work included getting the children ready for school, making dinner and completing home chores. As a youth leader, she also had to find time for church activities.

"It was challenging, I would get very tired and sometimes I would just do nothing at all. I would take work home, but it has been

a learning journey, eventually, I have learnt to balance my life at home and at work. I have made some changes at home- I have stopped taking work home, and I also focused on my physical and mental being, by eating, exercising, and sleeping well." "My husband, children and I now share responsibilities and its working well for us. "Likewise, with work, I have shared and delegated roles and responsibilities to officers who I believe have the potential and capability to carry out the role, so far its working well for our organisation."

Maria also believes good family support is critical for any working mother. "Having a career is challenging for a mother. I have always had the support from my immediate family and especially my husband, who had to make dinner when I'm tired or after a long day from work. He also has had to look after our children many times and be their "mother" while I am away on work trips. As a mother, it's never easy being away from my children."

Spiritual strength

Maria believes she has become the person she is because of her faith as a Christian and her involvement in the community, cultural groups, and sports in the past decade.

"I have over the years received support from many of these groups. When I am mentally, emotionally exhausted from the challenges of life, I find comfort and peace in church and God. There are times where things did not go my way at work or things were just impossible, I put my trust in God"

Professional journey

Maria's passion for her work comes from her patriotic love for her country, or as she says "paradise".

"I love my little paradise and would protect it in whatever way I can. Keeping our Cook Islands borders safe and helping to facilitate trade and collecting revenue for the country is important in building a better future for our children and

future generations."

Early in her career, Maria faced some challenges where she felt she was overlooked for training and promotion opportunities because she was a woman.

"The challenge for me as a woman was that I was a "small" voice amongst men, there were times where I was not heard or simply disregarded."

"I overcame this by being patient and bold and believing that my time will come. With every challenge there is always an opportunity to change and timing plays a big part in this. To make changes, your small voice can make those changes, however, it will take time you just have to be patient and be bold with what you want to achieve and believe there is a time for everything, for those who have the will to do well."



A woman leader

Growing up, Maria is used to being in a team of girls. She has three brothers and six sisters. She has a twin sister, and is the youngest in her family.

“As a women leader, I learn not to be the barrier but to be the way to change for the goodness of the organisation. I fully support gender equality and support the idea of sharing training and job opportunities to staff in the organisation provided it is relevant and supports their role. I am also looking at building more leaders within the organisation, because they’re the future.”

In her 16 years of service with CICS, Maria says she gained experience, knowledge, skills in different areas of Customs.

“I lead and manage a team of seven women, I do support gender equality as I believe working together is more powerful than working alone, but unfortunately the interested applicants for this area of work were all women. I also believe in supporting and empowering women in workplaces, at home or in the community by giving them the opportunity to grow and to show capacity and capability.”

COVID-19

CICS has had to make some redundancies as flights decreased from 22 to one a week.

“As a leader within the organisation I was mentally and emotionally affected as well, I felt obligated to help staff in any way I could. I remained in contact with these officers and kept them informed of any possible changes. Letting people go is one of the hardest decisions to make. We had to at some point, make these critical decisions as the situation became beyond our control.”

“But what I have learnt from all of these is that communication and providing

factual information is key. Keeping in contact with these officers and being honest about the situation is helpful even in a negative scenario.”

COVID-19 has also changed the way CICS operates and the priorities for the organization.

“We have simplified our processes and are now meeting and conducting short trainings using online platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams which are more cost effective.”

“Despite all of that, I am enjoying this time as I get to spend more time with my families.” Maria is also thankful she was part of the Pacific Leadership Program run by NZ Customs and funded by MFAT NZ in 2019, which allowed her to understand the importance of having leaders rather than bosses.

“The skills and knowledge gained from this program, has helped me in my current role.”

“In the last two years CICS went through some significant organizational structural changes, and I am proud to say I was part of these changes amongst with other lead-

ers in the organization. In the next month, we will start with ASYCUDA World Project.”

“Although we may be the smallest customs administration in the world, I can say that CICS in growing and glowing, that is because I believe we have leaders not bosses.”

Advice to women

Through her work, Maria has had the opportunity of making new friends from all over the globe. Describing herself as a highly self-motivated person who thrives in a diverse environment and loves meeting people from different cultural backgrounds, Maria says she enjoys work when she is presented with challenging situations.

But to be successful, she says one must first invest in their families and loved ones as they will always be the pillar of support.

“Be patient and bold, trust God’s timing and trust that God can do the impossible. Always learn to do the right thing, and do it together, for the goodness of your organisation or home. Alone you can do little, but together you can do so much, so support gender equality and empower and build more leaders than bosses.”



The Bond of Australian Border Force



Michelle Bond, Australian Border Force

Suva, Fiji, 17 March, 2021 – Michelle Bond works for the Australian Border Force with extensive experience in Customs. The proud single mother of two is one of the women featured in the OCO/PACNEWS Women in Customs Series.

What are your current responsibilities?

Currently, I am supporting a national project aimed at disrupting organised criminal infiltration within the international supply chain and exploring/implementing pre-border intervention strategies to detect narcotics and other illicit goods offshore.

This national project is achieved by working closely with international law and border protection counterparts as well as through the United Nations Office of Drug Control – World Customs Organization Container Control Program (UNODC-WCO CCP).

I am also currently programme managing a Women's Professional Development Programme which is an ABF initiative, in partnership with the UNODC-WCO Container Control Programme (CCP) Women's Network. The programme's aim is to develop and empower women in South East Asia &

working career is the stigma of being a single parent working full time. I have faced prejudice in thinking early in my career, which resulted in not being provided opportunities and categorised incorrectly. I was able to overcome this by finding and making my own opportunities throughout my career. I have sought out training that would provide me the skills I needed to apply for positions of interest. I have worked hard, built solid networks/relationships and surrounded myself with strong effective colleagues and leaders that I respect, admire and can learn from. In 2011, I deployed to a district office in a remote town in Australia for a five-year posting. I packed up my household, moved over 3000 kilometers away from family and friends and settled my family into a new community. As part of a district office posting, there is a high expectation for officers to travel for work, training and offshore deployments. I managed these challenges by being resilient, forming friendships, being an active member of the community and saw the situation as a great opportunity for both my children and me. From this I was able to be an effective

the Pacific CCP units to become effective leaders in the customs and border protection domain through the delivery of training and ongoing mentoring.

What is the biggest challenge you have overcome in your work?

One of the biggest challenges I have faced during my

officer, attend training courses interstate, had the ability to deploy offshore when required and run operational activity proving that I could manage both working full time as well as being a single parent who didn't allow this stigma to affect my work.

How did it feel to overcome these challenges?

It has been very empowering to overcome these challenges. I feel that I have built resilience and confidence and from these experiences have become a more capable, stronger and professional individual.

How has these experiences at work helped you in your life?

Overcoming challenges at work have seamlessly transferred into my everyday life. The resilience and confidence I have grown have made me a better and stronger person not only in my professional life but in my everyday life also. Modelling these behaviours have enabled my children to develop these life skills from a young age.

How has your work changed under COVID-19?

As with many organisations globally, the way we work has had to be more flexible. As we have not been able to travel offshore due to border closures, we have had to make a few adjustments. The team has organised online tradecraft training sessions and presentations for hundreds of officers both nationally and internationally (Fiji, NZ, US). We have had to change communication strategies to build and manage partnerships with key stakeholders.

The original plan for the *Women's Professional Development Programme* was to deliver a face to face training course which was to be held in Thailand by May 2021. To ensure that the programme can be delivered in this financial year, an online delivery option has been negotiated with a world leading Australian tertiary education provider. Benefits to delivering the programme online include an increase in participant numbers (24 to 50) and offering women a positive, innovative and flexible chance to engage in professional development whilst borders remain closed.

Odelaffi, a Good Servant of Palau



Odelaffi Sato, Palau

Suva, Fiji, 30 March, 2021- The adage never judge a book by its cover holds true for Odelaffi Sato, the woman behind the Post Audit Section of the Palau Bureau of Customs and Border Protection.

Armed with more than two decades of experience, she is your typical “no-nonsense” customs officer who has uncovered numer-

ous cases of tax evasion in her country as well as document falsification, and erroneous use and assignment of tariff codes.

“Paying taxes is the civic duty of all. These taxes are critical to the government for its effective operations and so that it continues to provide essential services to its people,” Odelaffi says.

“When people evade taxes or paying duties they deny the government revenue and they also deny the government its ability to perform its functions for the people. We have been able to

collect more revenue in the past from people who had attempted to evade duties or taxes or defraud the government.

“It’s cheaper to be honest and to do the right thing.”

Odelaffi has been in her current position since 2014. But her knowledge of all areas of Customs comes from her various stints within the organization.

Her career started at the Operation Unit where she was involved in the inspection and clearance of cargoes and vessels.

“I spent 10 years until 2008 with the unit, and my work included boarding vessels, inspecting containers and cargoes. That experience laid the foundation for my other roles within Palau Bureau of Customs and Border Protection.”

Odelaffi also spent five years in charge of the training section of the bureau.

COVID-19

Palau is COVID-19 free but the volume of trade is still almost the same levels as before the pandemic.

“The workload is still almost the same. Even though we do not have the virus, we are still on alert to ensure that the country is safe. We also already have contingency plans in place in the event, we do have a case.

“We are making sure to keep our borders safe and free from the virus as well as illicit drugs, contrabands and the work of criminals.”

About International Women's Day

International Women's Day is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity. Significant activity is witnessed worldwide as groups come together to celebrate women's achievements or rally for women's equality.

Marked annually on **March 8th**, International Women's Day (IWD) is one of the most important days of the year to:

- celebrate women's achievements
- raise awareness about women's equality
- lobby for accelerated gender parity
- fundraise for female-focused charities



Source: <https://www.internationalwomensday.com>

Sonia Uses Vast Experience to Modernize New Caledonia Customs



Sonia Lecomte, New Caledonia

Suva, Fiji, 30 March, 2021 – Sonia Lecomte is the deputy director of Customs in the French territory of New Caledonia, a position she has held in the last three years. She has worked for French Customs for the past 22 years, in various posts which included being head of the intelligence team at Le Havre in France. Sonia is one of the ladies featured in the OCO/PACNEWS Pacific Women in Customs series.

Her experience

Do you ever wonder how Customs officers find narcotics, contrabands or illicit drugs in cargoes or boats?

They don't comb every container but there is a team that investigates and studies the intelligence files of cargo ships before searching any suspicious containers.

In her 22-year career as a customs officer, Sonia has been involved in this kind of work.

In fact, she once was the head of the intelligence unit at one of France's most im-

portant ports, Le Havre Port. Though Le Havre Port is much larger than the Noumea port, being the second-largest commercial port in France in terms of overall tonnage, and the largest container port, with three sets of terminals—they and all ports in the world are targets for criminals.

While criminals plan ways to infiltrate a port, customs officers are also working hard on the other end to try and stop them.

It was at Le Havre that Sonia was part

of a team that created the Port Community System, which aimed to accelerate clearing procedure, increase the productivity of supply chain stakeholders and overall improve Customs control of cargoes. The system was replicated in the Caribbean island of Reunion and in New Caledonia as well.

"Having a system that works for importers, exporters and customs is important. Facilitating trade means the turnaround time needs to be fast and at the same time Customs needs to be assured that the necessary procedures have been undertaken to ensure there are no illegal activities."

Sonia also has experience in other roles such as being responsible for training officers and training programs, liaising with the business community.

Current work

As deputy director of Customs in New Caledonia, she is using her experiences in France in the much smaller Pacific region.

"I participate in the strategic and operational

management of Customs by using my experience to support the modernization of practices and processes. My team also supports the local government in the drafting of tax and customs regulations.

"I am also responsible for steering the policy of controls in New Caledonia so that Customs responds effectively to its priority missions of protecting the country and the collection of revenue."

Sonia has also been part of a team that ensured the regulation of the export of indigenous art in New Caledonia in 2019.

"Many don't realise the importance of work in Customs to protect the illicit trafficking of works of art. Even during our training, some customs officers were not aware that certain objects should be protected."

Challenges

Coming from a bigger jurisdiction, Sonia admits the biggest challenge in her work is understanding the tax environment and local economic issues in order to provide an informed and quality expertise in the drafting and implementation of new tax systems. "The establishment of Value Added Tax for imports in New Caledonia required a significant investment at all levels to support operators and customs agents in understanding and deploying this major tax reform. "Supporting tax reforms is a daily challenge, I think we must maintain constant vigilance to improve tax systems and provide more clarity and legal certainty to businesses and administrations. "Nonetheless, it was an enriching experience which allowed me to broaden my field of expertise in taxation." **COVID-19**

New Caledonia has remained COVID-19 free since April 2020. There had been some impacts on daily lives and customs operations.

"My mission is to support the Customs services as best as possible in order so that we can continue to uphold a high level of protection of New Caledonia, so that we can continue to collect revenue while guaranteeing the health security of the people."

Stephanie, the “Trouble-Shooter” at OCO



Stephanie Waqanivalagi, Oceania Customs Organisation Secretariat

Suva, Fiji, 23 March 2021 – *In an organization, there is always that one person who everyone goes to get things done. At the Oceania Customs Organisation (OCO), that person is Stephanie Waqanivalagi who is the “trouble-shooter” making sure operations run smoothly.*

This is her story.

Life’s experiences

Growing up in a family of six girls, Stephanie believes her life’s experiences prepared her for every possible encounter in the workplace. “I believe my sisters and I are all uniquely different. Contrary to popular belief, we seldom argued although equally opinionated and tenacious in our own views, we somehow found a way to coexist without driving each other up the wall.” But it is her mother Finau Tivakano, a former news anchor woman for Fiji Television, who has taught her life skills. “There was never a dull moment with her, she’d often spend hours with us on our front porch teaching us the ‘ukelele’ or guitar, singing and telling folk tales of her island home Rotuma (North of the Fiji group). “She was an excellent listener who took the time to hear our views and aid us in navigating our way through life’s challenges. In her eyes there was simply no substitute for hard work and

respect, but self-expression was always something she encouraged to be able to know your own identity and not be fearful to express it respectfully.” Being a family of girls, Stephanie recalls one time after church when one commented how unfortunate her parents were as they did not have a son. “This took us by surprise as we were never made to feel ‘less’ than boys. With a smile on her face, my Mum responded, “My girls have been too much of a joy and a blessing in our lives, we’ve not had the time to wish for otherwise”. Now a mother herself, Stephanie believes nothing in this life should be taken for granted and every chance to show kindness should not go to waste. “Living a purposeful life like that of Christ can only yield fulfillment and true genuine meaning that we each have been called to re-

gardless of our who we are or where we come from. There is a purpose for which we exist and to this very day, I am still learning mine.”

Current role

As an executive assistant, Stephanie’s daily responsibilities include supporting the OCO Head of Secretariat, management team and staff providing administrative support to coordinating activities. “I am often required to liaise with OCO’s 23 member countries on planned activities such as workshops and meetings as well as supporting the Steering Committee during meetings. “As a first point of contact with our partners and other organisations, I am a firm believer of managing the perception of any visitor by maintaining an attitude of service. Similarly when visiting a new country, we want to be treated respectfully and have our needs heard and attended to, at the Secretariat it is part of my job to ensure you ‘our members and partners’ are made to feel welcome and provide the necessary support in my capacity as the executive assistant.”

Overcoming challenges

Things can be stressful for Stephanie on days. But for her managing her reaction to stressful situations whether it be a delayed response from a vendor or a follow up with

no end in sight is very important. “Maintaining professionalism with a side dose of firmness can often resolve matters that would otherwise tarry. “Understanding the policies and guidelines that dictate our work is imperative in confidently carrying out one’s duties while maintaining a mindset of ‘learning’ even in areas considered foreign to you, my advice is to read, read and read! “It is not enough to simply know a bit about a subject, I believe in immersing myself into learning as much as I can to get ahead of the task entrusted to me. “What do you have to lose? You learn something new and grow your vocabulary.” With a mindset that from every difficult situation there is always a lesson to learn and grow from. Stephanie also believes in ‘self-talk’ because “there will always be opposition and we simply can’t allow the negativity to induce even an inkling of self-doubt”. “Take for instance how young girls and even women are considered beautiful if they are slim like models or celebrities in the tabloids and on every advertising gimmick we see, this is a farce because we all know beauty comes in all shapes and sizes and women should be celebrated for their intellect and tenacity in being able to weather the storms of life while still holding her own in the family and work place.”

COVID-19

As with countless others around the region, COVID-19 has proven unfamiliar territory for many, it will take some time to navigate through our ‘new normal’ which has become the ‘normal’ for many Pacific island countries. Much of OCO’s activities and communications is carried out virtually or online and with this change comes a much-needed adaptability to be able to function and progress in an otherwise ‘stalemated’ situation. “My work now requires me to familiarise myself more regularly with new technologies and practices that support online communications and engagement with members, partners and stakeholders while maintaining relevance for the benefit of our greater membership. “However, if there is one learning that I take away from this global crisis, it is the ability of Pacific Islanders to remain resilient in times of uncertainty and to show genuine kindness in the face of adversity.”

Talei's Contribution to Fiji



Talei Katonibau, Fiji Revenue and Customs Service

Suva, Fiji, 17 March, 2021 – **Talei Katonibau** is a Customs Officer in the Tariff and Trade Section of the Fiji Revenue and Customs Service, a position she has held for six years. The Tariff and Trade Section is responsible for the administration of duty concessions, import licenses and providing advice on import restrictions and Customs Regulations to internal and external stakeholders. Sounds mundane but the section is one of the most important in FRCS in terms of facilitating trade and revenue collection.

What are your current responsibilities?

We prepare assessments of relevant regulations, analyze trade data and make recommendations for relevant decision making. We are basically problem solvers. We analyze the request and assess the relevant legislations that will best resolve the matter and make appropriate recommendations. We also support the Policy Team in National Budget preparations for FRCS. Being one of only 2 female Customs officials participating in the 2020/2021 Fiji National Budget Announcement core discussions which saw major reforms in more than 1900 tariff

lines was a memorable experience. The exercise was strenuous, but we had to deliver efficiently and within strict timelines. Expectations were high as we were required to properly classify goods and interpret tariff descriptions to government officials for crucial decision making.

Additional responsibilities

As the contact person of the LTA/FRCS MOU I correspond almost daily with LTA (Land Transport Authority) to discuss inter-agency issues on motor vehicles and machinery and ensure

that our agency's interests are protected in terms of import compliance, standards compliance and vehicle registrations. The LTA/FRCS Working Group discussions has helped make regulation changes to motor vehicle imports and achieve alignment of locally enforced restrictions by LTA with the import restrictions of FRCS.

I am also representing FRCS in various national environmental working groups such as the Agreement for Climate Change and Trade Sustainability – ACCTS negotiations for the environment goods and fossil fuel subsidies pillars and the National Polystyrene Ban Committee. My favorite project at the moment is the ACCTS negotiations as it is now a major ongoing discussion that will see trade liberalization of goods that have relevance to mitigating climate change. With Fiji being the only Pacific small island developing state in the negotiations this puts greater pressure on ensuring that our interests are represented in the discussions.

What is the biggest challenge you have

overcome in your work?

One of the biggest challenges is working outside the scope of what I studied in University. I first started under the Customs Graduate Trainee Program in 2015 after graduating from the University of the South Pacific with Bachelor of Commerce in Economics and Accounting. While I had expected to be engaged in work that was more suited for my background, there were bigger plans put in place for me in Tariff and Trade. There may have been a bit of self-doubt and fear when first starting because I was limiting my own potential.

How did it feel to overcome this challenge?

It has been rewarding. I am proud of the work I do because it helps the Nation. Our team has been crucial in policy formulation and implementation for Customs in Fiji. I also get to be part of climate change discussions because of relevant exposure in tariff classifications, trade analysis and industry specific knowledge. I would not have had these opportunities without my team and the mentoring of my various managers who trusted me provided constant guidance throughout my career.

How has these experiences at work helped you in your life?

Overcoming the challenges has given me the confidence to take on more challenging tasks outside the scope of what I think I am capable of. I have learnt to have more confidence in myself and not undermine myself. I have carried that mindset in all the aspects of my life and tried to have a positive outlook when faced with challenges.

How has your work changed under COVID-19?

We have had to change our perspective in terms of policy designing to cater to the situation at hand. Being mindful of the potential threats and how to mitigate it is constantly in our mind as we prepare for the upcoming National Budget Announcement.

Vaeira's Parisian Experience Helps her Work in French Polynesia



Vaeari Taura, French Polynesia

Suva, Fiji, 10 March 2021 – When the COVID-19 crisis hit French Polynesia, it was déjà vu for Vaeari Taura who had spent some time as a customs auditor at Roissy Charles de Gaulle International Airport in Paris when the pandemic enveloped France. The opportunity helped her to gather invaluable insights into the crisis, which helped her in her work as a controller when she returned home.

Brought up by her mother and grandparents, Vaeari has always worked hard to achieve her dreams. With her husband Jay working for an airline company and being a mother to a six-year-old Tunui, Vaeira sees challenges as opportunities to further her dreams even during COVID-19.

Challenges of working during COVID-19

"I have had the opportunity to see the crisis from two different perspectives—being part of the operation and then as an officer supporting the operations," the 35-year-old says.

"At the beginning of the crisis, I worked as a Customs auditor at Roissy Charles de Gaulle International airport, France. "I used to work 12 hours a day and checked hundreds of declarations, but the COVID pandemic brought our work to another level.

"Although we didn't go to work as often as before, I felt much more exhausted when I came back home at the end of the day.

We faced challenges because of the increasing number of declarations, constant changes of applicable Customs laws and regulations, intensive work required in an atmosphere of anxiety and stress."

Every day she met hundreds of people and while she carried out her daily work, at the back of her mind she knew the risk of contracting the virus was real and possible. When she returned to French Polynesia, Vaeari was promoted to a Controller and is responsible for providing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for Customs officers.

"The experience in Paris helped me understand the difficulties and the risks as a frontline Customs officer," she says. "I strive to ensure their safety so they can fulfill their tasks, under the best possible health conditions. We regularly remind them all rules of health and best practices while providing them with all necessary equipment as their protection is a constant concern."

Lessons learned

"This crisis isn't over yet but I've already

learned some lessons from it," she says. "I need to be flexible and have the ability to adapt to new tasks, establish closer teamwork and cooperation with my co-workers.

"Like most islands of the Pacific, French Polynesia only had few cases of infected people during the first wave of COVID-19, due to an early border shutdown.

"There were economic repercussions and the government decided to open the borders which led to the second wave of infection. Some of those infected were Customs officers. "However, it is paramount to add that none of them was infected at their workplace but in their private circles.

"As a consequence, they did not infect their co-workers. We are glad to report that there was no so-called "COVID cluster" in French Polynesia Customs unlike most other public administrations and private companies across Tahiti."

French Polynesia is still working to contain the virus but Vaeira believes everyone must work together.

"We've got to have solidarity and empathy to continue to carry out our mission as a whole," she says.



GALLERY



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