



# VOICE

Keeping Abreast with  
Human Resource Management



## Feature– Interview with Dr. Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry, President, World Maritime University

**VF INC'S VOICE: Issue #8**

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We thank you for your comments on Issue #6. This week we planned to feature "The Little Heroes of COVID-19: Our Children," however, we have received a number of requests for an extension and so we will feature our Little Heroes next week. We thank the parents, grandparents and aunts who have so far shared with us their stories and pictures. We can't wait to publish that issue! If you have not yet shared your story, please submit to us, with pictures by Tuesday, June 16, 2020.



Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry was born and raised in Dominica. Despite the sad and early passing of her mother that left her father to bring up nine children all alone, Cleopatra excelled at school and was soon winning a scholarship to the University of the West Indies Cave Hill Campus in Barbados. And Cleopatra has not looked back, taking top positions with international Maritime University in Malmö.

Here Cleopatra details her life and her important legal work before, it seems, moving effortlessly into the maritime sector.

**Q. Where were you born and where did you grow up?**

**A.** I was born in the village of Mahaut on the island of The Commonwealth of Dominica and grew up there until I left for the University of the West Indies, to do my first degree after my "A" level exams.

**Q. As a child, did you speak English or Kwéyòt at home?**

**A.** At home, I spoke English, although outside of home I spoke "creole" with friends and the older people.

**Q. What did your parents do for a living?**

**A.** My father was an educator, farmer and politician. He was a teacher at the Saint Mary's Academy. He was a member of Parliament from 1957-1970. He served as Minister for Labour & Social Services and also as Minister of Education. My mother was a seamstress, shopkeeper and housewife. She unfortunately died at the very early age of 45, leaving nine children whom my father had to take care of.

**Q. Where did you go to school and then to university?**

**A.** I went to primary school in the village of Massacre, a four kilometre walk from my village of Mahaut. In those days, we walked to school. I went on to the Convent High School (a girls' school) in

This week, we feature an interview with Dr. Cleopatra Doumbia Henry, President of the World Maritime University (WMU) and the Caribbean Maritime – a Journal of the Caribbean Shippers Association featured in "[Caribbean Maritime, Issue #39 – January – April 2020.](#)" This article is published with the kind permission of Dr. Doumbia-Henry.

Roseau, at the same time as my older sister after successfully passing "The Common Entrance Exam".

I went on to do A levels which I successfully passed, despite the sudden passing away of my mother just two weeks before taking the UK 'A' Level Exams. I had taken on a teaching position at the Convent High School in September 1973, before learning in the course of that month as I was awarded a Canadian Government Scholarship to go to university at the Cave Hill Campus, University of the West Indies (UWI), Barbados, to which I had applied.

This was the big game changer of my life. I successfully completed my first year of studies in the Faculty of Arts & General Studies. At the end of the first year, I decided to switch faculties and transferred to the Faculty of Law at the Cave Hill Campus, which I successfully completed in three years.

**Q. In which subject(s) did you graduate? And where and when did you gain your PhD?**

**A.** I graduated with an upper second-class degree in Law from the University of the West Indies (UWI). I immediately enrolled on graduation to pursue a master's degree in law at the Cave Hill Campus and was granted a scholarship to undertake my Master's studies. While at UWI, I was awarded a full scholarship by the Government of Switzerland to pursue my PhD in international law at the Graduate Institute of International Studies and the University of Geneva. I obtained my PhD in 1984.

While pursuing my PhD, I prepared for the exams at the Inns of Court of the United Kingdom and was admitted to the Inner Temple Inns of Court and called to the Bar in Dominica, both in 1984.

**Q. How did you come to join the International Labour Organization (ILO)? You were later appointed the first female director of the International Labour Standards Department. What are your recollections of your time as**

**the department head and your many years at the ILO?**

**A.** I won a competition for a legal position in the Office of the Legal Adviser at the ILO in 1985. That same year, I had joined the Iran-US Claims Tribunal in the Hague as Legal Assistant to the President of the Tribunal. I therefore joined the ILO one year later in 1986. I worked for over 29 years for the ILO as a lawyer and manager. In my 14 years in the Office of the Legal Adviser, I worked on a wide range of legal issues.

In 2000, I was promoted and transferred as deputy director to the Sectorial Activities Department and in 2001 was made Director of that Department. In 2005, I was appointed to head one of the biggest portfolios in the ILO – The International Labour Standards Department. As of 1999, I led a major legislative reform of the body of 72 maritime labour instruments adopted by the ILO since 1920. This led to the negotiations, drafting and consolidation of 68 out of 72 international labour instruments into a single Convention, leading to the adoption of one of the most innovative and effective maritime labour instruments, the Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC, 2006). This instrument is today applicable to the most global of industries, the maritime industry, which seeks to establish a level playing field for shipowners and effective protection and rights at work for seafarers.

My career at the ILO will remain part of the best years of my life as I have been able to witness real impact on the ground of the effect of international standards and the creation of a level playing field. I can also remember the long days and nights spent during the annual ILO Conferences and the many late-night meetings during the development and negotiation of the MLC, 2006. I sometimes went home for just about three or four hours of sleep, change of clothes and return to the conference. I also worked with some remarkable Director-Generals.

**Q. This role at the ILO eventually led to your involvement in the IMO Maritime Labour Convention. Is this correct and was this your first encounter with the maritime sector?**

**A.** In fact, my doctoral thesis was on Law-Making by International Organizations. In this regard, I had examined a full panoply of international organizations with a view to understanding the impact of law-making by UN organizations. This led me to focus more specifically on the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as I was fascinated by the way in which the technical international instruments adopted by IMO had an incredible impact due to the global nature of shipping and the need for uniform standards required to enable shipping to be safe, secure and protect the marine environment.

**Q. You became president of the World Maritime University (WMU) in 2015. What have been your most notable achievements since taking on this high-profile position?**

**A.** I joined the WMU as its President in July 2015. I am the first woman president and the first from a developing country to head the University. I have now served the WMU for four and a half years and I have begun another four-year term.

Among the many important actions that I have taken, they relate to both academic and non-academic programs and include the following: a major reform of the WMU Charter to reflect current day realities and future developments; the launch of an Endowment Fund for the University to ensure its financial sustainability and the putting in place of mechanisms to support the Fund, including our flagship Stewards of the Sea Campaign; the expansion of our maritime research program and portfolio; an expansion of the University's mandate to include ocean issues with the establishment of the WMU-Sasakawa Global Ocean Institute within the University to lead cutting-edge ocean research; the growth in the core funding of the university from a broader range of sources; an increase in the

number of faculty members; an increase in the number of students and in particular women; an expanded and growing list of donors providing fellowships for students from developing countries and funding for cutting-edge research; the expansion of the number of programs and specializations taught at the University; an increase in student intake for both our Master's and our PhD programs; the broadening of our Distance-Learning programs and the provision of short tailor-made courses delivered either at the University or on site for the client; the full integration of the UN Sustainable Development Goals within the curriculum and research work of the university; a greater diverse body of faculty and staff, including the increase in the intake of women among the student body and the University's staff; alignment of WMU with the conditions of employment applicable in the United Nations System including the affiliation of all Faculty and Staff to the United Nations Joint Staff Pension Fund.

**Q. As someone with strong Caribbean roots, how do you enjoy living in less-than- tropical Malmö?**

**A.** Although I have now lived most of my life in Switzerland outside of my wonderful small island of Dominica and now in Sweden, I remain close to my very big family most of whom live in Dominica. I make yearly visits home to get some rest and keep the family bond which is very close.

I have now lived in Malmö for over four years and I have begun another term as President for a further four-years. The Swedes are very hospitable and supportive. I was acclimatized to the winter in Switzerland and as Malmö is the most southern part of Sweden, I have found the winters quite bearable. The biggest challenge is the short daylight during the winter. But one gets used to this as well.

**Q. Throughout your distinguished career you have often been the first woman appointed to a particular**

**position, so do you consider yourself to be a pioneer and a role model for other women?**

**A.** I consider myself to be a very fortunate person and one who has been provided with exceptional opportunities. I have never taken anything for granted. I always feel that I must deserve the trust that has been placed in me and must work hard to ensure that I meet expectations. I have been supported throughout my career by incredible bosses and mentors, most of whom were men. I have much to pay back for all these angels and those who have inspired and supported me along my route.

My father was my inspiration. Two former ILO Legal Advisors, Francis Maupain and Dominick Devlin, not only mentored me, they gave me the opportunities to take the lead and to assume responsibility. The ILO Director-General, Juan Somavia, appointed me to the senior management functions to head the most challenging departments of the organization. These were three incredible mentors who encouraged me, and being a woman and from a small island developing country were not factors that were considered.

They did not see me with those lenses. They gave me confidence, encouraged me and conferred on me senior level responsibilities. **They were there if I needed advice but gave me the space to make mistakes. What was important was to learn from these mistakes.** These men are now among my best friends and to whom I owe a depth of gratitude. **This is the reason why, for me today, my role is to mentor, to enable young people to develop expertise and be given an opportunity to grow, making mistakes along the way, but being stronger with lessons learnt.**

My family – my husband and our two sons - have also been incredibly supportive even when I worked until 3 o'clock in the morning and weekends. Even today, while I should have retired, they have encouraged me to continue to pursue my dreams and give back to society. To them, I owe a depth of gratitude and have

often felt guilty for short-changing them. My hope for them is that they seek their own paths with hard work, determination and passion.

**For women, we have today a much broader spectrum than ever before. There are no limits with respect to the careers women choose. We have the same talent and expertise. We should and must have the same opportunities.** We are seeing a sea change with more women now occupying senior positions in all sectors of economic activity. However, maritime remains one of the few industries where women still remain largely under-represented.

We urgently need that sea change. The IMO dedicated the 2019 Maritime Day Theme "Empowering Women in the Maritime Community". This theme was taken on by the entire maritime industry in 2019 and has been celebrated in countries around the world. The official World Maritime Day celebrations took place in Colombia this year. WMU hosted a major conference in April 2019 on "Empowering Women in the Maritime Community". The Conference agreed on 17 recommendations to be taken forward to enable positive change to be made.

**Q. Are you a member of WISTA?**

**A.** Yes, I am a member of two WISTA Associations – WISTA Italy and WISTA Sweden.

**Q. As someone who has moved around the world throughout your career, where is home?**

**A.** I try to make home wherever I am. The family home is in Switzerland where our two wonderful boys were born and I met my husband, Zandiougou Doumbia, who is from Mali. I however now live in Malmö and where I feel very comfortable and have a good support network.

**Q. Finally, can we ask you something about your personal life? And of your main interests outside of work in terms of hobbies, sports and leisure activities?**

**A.** Concerning my personal life, I am married to a wonderful man from Mali in West Africa for the past 34 years and we have two boys, both of whom studied in the US. Except for myself, they are all fluent in German, in addition to French and English. My languages are English, French and Spanish. Now in Sweden, I am slowly learning Swedish.

I have had a fantastic and uninterrupted career for which I am most grateful. This was made possible by a fantastic husband. Outside of work, I read a lot and like walking.

***We Thank and Bless Dr. Cleopatra Dumbia-Henry for permission to republish this article.***

We will feature "The Little Heroes of COVID-19: Our Children," in Issue # 9.

We look forward to hearing from you with comments on this article, suggestions for topics to be covered and sharing of your HR experience, especially during the COVID-19 era. Please feel free to share this Newsletter with your contacts. We also welcome guest authors and look forward to receiving your articles for publication.

**We have moved to 78, Independence Street, Roseau, Commonwealth of Dominica**

We, at VF Inc, stand ready to serve and be of service to our clients and prospective clients, "with Integrity and Excellence," in keeping with our Motto.

Until next week, May God continue to Keep us in the Palm of His Hands. Please send us your questions, comments and share your experience managing in the COVID-19- era at [info@vfinc.org](mailto:info@vfinc.org). You may also reach us by telephone: 1 767 275 0566/617 0566.



"I never dreamed about success. I worked for it."

**Estee Lauder**

"It is possible to climb to the top without stomping on other people."

**Taylor Swift**