



## WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

### Interview with Onalenna T. Koboyankwe, Botswana Unified Revenue Service



As part of the WCO Women in Customs series, we had the pleasure of sitting down with Onalenna T. Koboyankwe, Principal Customs Officer in charge of Data Management at the Botswana Unified Revenue Service (BURS). Read on to learn about her journey towards a fulfilling, albeit challenging, role, her passion for Customs and international trade, her perspectives on leadership and her commitment to continuous learning and growth throughout her career.

**WCO:** Onalenna, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. Could you briefly introduce yourself? Where did you grow up, and how did you come to work in Customs?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** Onalenna T. Koboyankwe: I'm from Botswana, and I come from a village close to the border with South Africa. Like many people there, my parents were small traders and would cross over the border regularly to purchase products to sell in their shop. I would sometimes accompany them, so I knew about Customs from a very young age, but without really understanding what it was all about. I was a bit scared by it, to tell the truth. Because of my parents' business, I had an interest in trade issues, but I would never have imagined back then that, one day, I would be the one controlling traders.

I chose to study economics at the University of Botswana, located in the capital city of Gaborone. I had graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences with a major in Economics when I learned that the Botswana Unified Revenue Service was hiring fresh graduates in economics and accounting for both its tax division and its Customs division. This was in 2008. I passed an interview with more than 120 candidates who

were competing for 30 positions. I was selected, and, when asked to choose which division I wanted to join, I chose Customs, even though I knew that I might be assigned away from home. I started working as an operational officer, mostly dealing with inland clearance.

**WCO:** Were there many women applying to enter Customs at the time?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** There were very few women candidates, and most of them were trying to get into the tax division because they thought that a job in Customs would take them to remote rural areas or regions far from the capital. But I wanted a job related to international trade, and that was a risk that I was willing to take. I also knew that Customs was a very specialized and challenging field. I chose the challenge, not comfort.

**WCO:** What was your first place of assignment, and what did you do there?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** I was assigned to the far north of the country, to a town called Kazungula where Botswana and Zambia have established a One-Stop Border Post. However, as I had enrolled in the Certificate Programme in Business Administration at the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants, which was in Gaborone, it was decided that I should stay in the city to work in what's called an "outdoor office".

We were a team of 10 officers, made up of two women and eight men. The job consisted in controlling warehouses and supervising export operations so as to ensure that businesses were complying with the regulations and claiming preferential treatment where they were entitled to do so. We worked in pairs. The two women of the team were always paired with a man, but men and women had to do the exact same tasks. We all wore uniform overalls so that we could climb or bend over without feeling uncomfortable.

At first, the business people we interacted with were not comfortable with us. They only saw us as trouble. But they soon came to realize the benefits and value of Customs' controls for themselves and for the country. I became really interested in this educational side of the job, and I would always volunteer when my administration or a ministry put a call out for experts to deliver training to or hold meetings with traders, or even to provide support for taxpayers.

**WCO:** What was the next step in your career?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** I worked in the field for six years and then applied for the position of Senior Customs Officer. Seven positions had been advertised, and about 200 officers were competing for them.

After doing the interview, I joined the graduate trainee programme, an inception training course for all newly hired Customs officers that had only just been implemented in 2014. I was still in the programme when I learned that I'd been selected and hired to work in the Post-Clearance Audit Unit.

It was quite a change for me, as I went from a job which involved running around all day from one task to the next to one that involved reading all day. In Botswana, we'd say it was a bit like "moving from a government school to a private school".

Post-clearance audit is an area in which you conduct research, do extensive reading and consult experts to make sure that your recommendations are in line with the regulations and consistent with other decisions, for example advance rulings. I had to further my technical knowledge and manage a team of three officers. That was my first supervisory role. There were far more women in the unit – almost as many as there were men.

**WCO:** Did you ever stop learning?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** No, never! At the time, I'd registered on the WCO CLiKC! platform and followed many of the online courses which provided me with a lot of clarity on a number of Customs aspects.

My colleagues would always see me leave the office with my laptop in hand. During breaks, we'd talk about our evening or what we'd done at the weekend, and I'd tell them about what I'd learned. I even got some of them interested in what the WCO had to offer, and I've one female colleague in particular who followed my example and is now actively involved in supporting the WCO's capacity-building activities.

In 2019, I even decided to enrol in the three-year Commonwealth Executive Master of Business Administration (CEMBA) programme offered by Botswana Open University. One of the topics I studied there was the management of information systems.

It was hard to work and study at the same time, but it really helped me get to the position where I am now – Principal Customs Officer in charge of Data Management. I deal with projects relating to the management of Customs information and work closely with the information technology department. I try to bridge the gap between IT personnel and Customs technical officers by breaking down complex concepts and processes into simple language. I'm often asked to attend meetings to provide support or to test solutions and provide feedback.

I supervise three officers directly, but I also manage projects involving a larger number of people. BURS is conducting its first WCO Time Release Study (TRS), and I'm the chair of the technical working group responsible for its management. The TRS brings together a wide range of Customs employees, from statistical analysts to border control staff, as well staff from the other agencies responsible for controlling goods at the border and traders. The BURS leadership is also involved, as well as the WCO Secretariat which is providing assistance.

I'm also leading the implementation of a project on Customs systems interconnectivity and automated data exchange among the Customs administrations in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Here as well, a lot of different departments are involved, and we're called on to work with our counterparts in the region. The WCO Secretariat is also supporting this initiative.

**WCO:** How do you manage to run these projects concurrently? How do you find time for yourself and your family?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** It was especially difficult during the first few years, and I had to work overtime to understand the complex and technical aspects of these projects. I was even advised to choose between the two while also being praised for handling them so efficiently. I therefore decided to keep working on both projects. The key is to plan and be disciplined. I organize my tasks into a schedule according to project priorities and complete them one by one. As a supervisor, I obviously delegate tasks to others as well.

Today, I feel that I've managed to achieve a good balance between work and home life. I do a lot of physical exercise, such as hiking or running, which helps give me energy. I also have a very active social life, and I participate in church activities.

I have a daughter who's about to turn 20 and who's been incredibly supportive. My family, especially my mother and my siblings, has always been helpful, taking care of my daughter when I was away from home. They still help me today, even though she says she can stay on her own.

**WCO:** Could you share some of the things you've learned about managing people?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** I've learned to communicate in order to plan effectively and get everyone on board with meeting objectives and deadlines. I've learned to dedicate time to engaging with individuals you supervise in order to see things from their perspective and understand their difficulties and needs. Most women tend to have essential qualities like empathy and paying attention to others. Therefore, I think they already have all the potential they need to become great leaders.

**WCO:** What is the balance like between men and women in the Administration today? Do women face any specific difficulties?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** When I joined Customs 15 years ago, it was a very male-dominated environment, especially in departments that were in charge of operations or statistics. Today, the ratio is more balanced, although not when it comes to management positions, which are still mainly occupied by men.

BURS has worked with the WCO Secretariat to conduct a "Gender Equality and Diversity Organizational Assessment" and develop an action plan based on its findings. The Customs department is very much involved in the work of the WCO in this field, and we even have one WCO recognized expert among the staff.

Women and men are treated equally, whether they apply for positions or for training. The Administration has also worked hard to ensure the comfort of its employees, especially in remote areas. Residences have been built, as well as sport centres. Staff members' children are provided with transport to the nearest schools every day, and there's also always transport available to staff from their house to the border post, no matter the time of day.

One thing that could be done is to allow remote working for positions where staff are not required to work in the field. This would be especially beneficial for women.

We should also talk more openly on the issue of sexual harassment. Women need to understand that this behaviour is not acceptable, and they should not be afraid to report such incidents. Some women still think that they need someone to help them advance in their career, whereas this is clearly not the case.

**WCO:** What are your perspectives for the future?

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** I'd still like my work to involve trade issues but at more of an international level, maybe even abroad. I've always wanted to work as a diplomat. In a more immediate time frame, I'd like to look into the field of Customs risk management.

**WCO:** Thank you so much for sharing your journey with us, Onalenna. We wish you all the best in your future endeavours.

**Onalenna T. Koboyankwe:** Thank you. I'm glad I could support this campaign. Women need to be encouraged and given the opportunity to recognize their potential. I hope my story will inspire other women to join Customs and build what's a very challenging but extremely rewarding career. There's no better purpose in life than working for the well-being of your community, and that's what Customs is all about.