



## WOMEN IN CUSTOMS

### Interview with Kanika Khim, General Department of Customs and Excise of Cambodia



As part of the WCO Women in Customs series, we had the pleasure of sitting down with Kanika Khim, Assistant Director of the Phnom Penh International Airport Customs and Excise Department. While telling us about her professional career in what is essentially a male-dominated environment, she explains how Customs work has evolved towards greater efficiency and enhanced engagement. We hope this interview conveys Kanika's remarkable energy, joy of life and desire to improve, learn and share her knowledge.

**WCO:** Kanika, thank you for joining us today. Could you tell us a little about yourself? Where do you come from, and how did you end up joining Customs?

**Kanika Khim:** I'm from Cambodia – I was born in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, in 1983. I studied pharmacy and English at university. While I was studying, I got married and had kids. I first had two daughters, who are currently 21 and 17, and then later a son who is now 8.

I had been a housewife for six years when I decided it was time for me to get a job. My husband had been working for Customs for some years back then, and the Administration was recruiting. The entrance exam was open to individuals with a bachelor's degree, so I decided to give it a go. Even with a Customs officer in the family, I didn't know much about Customs, but the examination dealt with mathematics, English and general knowledge.

I took the entrance exam in 2010. There were more than 4,000 candidates for 100 posts. I passed the exam, successfully completed a three-month induction training programme and then took up my post at the international airport, where I am still working today.

**WCO:** Did you ever get to use your knowledge in pharmacy?

**Kanika Khim:** I did actually! Knowing chemistry is still very useful. I can easily spot a mistake in the import of medical products, medicines and even some equipment. Whenever there's a problem with a shipment of such items, I'm called on to help.

**WCO:** Can you tell us about your beginnings and the journey to where you are now?

**Kanika Khim:** I started working at the airport as part of the operational team in charge of controlling passengers and cargo. We would rotate monthly from the passenger terminals to the cargo terminal. Since 2016, I've been working in cargo control as part of a team of 10 officers, and my work focuses especially on the control of express consignments.

In addition to working at the airport, I participate in the Customs Valuation Group, and I was a member of the Committee responsible for updating the Customs Tariff in 2017 and 2022. I also took part in many reform projects such as the revision of the Customs Law and the development of an IT system to process express consignments.

One important step in my journey was when I was selected to join Cambodia's Air Cargo Control Unit (ACCU) in 2018 under the Passenger and Cargo Control Programme, which is co-managed by the WCO and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. I therefore had the opportunity to participate in many training courses, including some abroad, and to learn from other countries' experiences and best practices. The creation of the ACCU had a huge impact on the way we work.

**WCO:** Can you explain how things have changed?

**Kanika Khim:** To select shipments for inspection, we used to analyse data based on risk indicators that we had developed based on our experience, the main indicator being the country of origin. However, we were essentially conducting random checks. We also lacked the equipment needed to identify chemical compositions.

During the training provided by WCO experts, we learned how to use various information sources and indicators to profile shipments and passengers. As a result, we're able to target controls more effectively, which is of utmost importance given the increase in the volume of passengers and air cargo flows over the past few years. We were also provided with a spectrometer to identify chemical elements.

One challenge in implementing a robust risk management policy is that some documents, such as cargo manifests, are not readily available in a digitized format.

We have recently implemented a system enabling us to receive information on express consignments electronically, and we use the Global Travel Assessment System that was donated by U.S. Customs and Border Protection to collect advance passenger information and passenger name record data.

Both systems have been crucial in enhancing our capacity to screen data steadily and consistently against risk indicators and assess risks before express consignments or passengers arrive.

However, for air cargo, manifests are handed over in paper format when the goods arrive at the airport.

**WCO:** It seems that practices and processes have evolved at a rapid pace in recent years.

**Kanika Khim:** Indeed, the Administration has steadily modernized its operations and processes. A new Customs law has recently been finalized and will soon be submitted to Parliament for adoption.

What is interesting is that even field officers can drive change. From time to time, we're required to provide feedback on policies and the issues we face in the field.

For example, for a long time, Cambodia didn't accept transshipment operations.\* I had learned about the procedure from our foreign counterparts and while following courses on the WCO CLiKC! platform. When the government permitted my Administration to develop a regulation on transshipment, I put my knowledge to good use and contributed to drafting the new procedure.

Trade representatives are also consulted during the regulatory development process. The way Customs interacts with traders and their representatives has also evolved significantly. At the airport, we are here to help, not just to enforce the law. We try to understand their difficulties and identify where they've gone wrong so that they can learn from their mistakes.

**WCO:** Are there many women working in Customs in Cambodia, and is it usual to see women working in the field?

**Kanika Khim:** Around 15% of Customs officers are women. Most women in Cambodia aren't interested in Customs work. When I joined in 2010, very few women were applying, and that's still the case today. In fact, only three of the 15 individuals in the ACCU are women.

I don't see any difference of treatment between men and women. Our managers are the ones assessing us, as they know how we work, behave and perform. Women are

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\* According to the definition laid down in the WCO Revised Kyoto Convention, "transshipment" means the Customs procedure under which goods are transferred under Customs control from the importing means of transport to the exporting means of transport within the area of one Customs office which is the office of both importation and exportation."

more likely to be promoted given that the Administration has gender quotas to meet to ensure women are well represented, especially at the decision-making level, and there are very few women in Customs.

The main factor deterring women from entering Customs is the rotation system. As a Customs officer, you may be asked to move to another part of the country, and most women are not ready to break the tradition and will put their family stability first. Luckily, women in Customs do enjoy some advantages – for example, they don't have to work nightshifts – but they do have to agree to work away from home when it's time to rotate.

**WCO:** Is it difficult to work in such a male-dominated environment? What advice would you give to new female recruits?

**Kanika Khim:** It can be difficult, especially when you work in the field, as you spend a lot of time with your teammates. For example, if you're not interested in what men usually like to talk about, such as sports, you may feel excluded and bored. I never encountered this problem because I like talking, and I always participate in conversations with the men on my team, whatever the topic is, but I understand that it can be hard for some women.

Attending a meeting with only men around the table can also be intimidating. I always come prepared. If I present an idea, I make sure that I have all the information, facts and figures to support it.

It's important for women to build their confidence and develop specific managerial skills. I took courses on leadership to learn how to talk in public and, more importantly, how to genuinely listen.

Listening is the key to effective communication, especially when you're managing operational officers and have to give them orders and instructions. It's part of the job to be assertive in the way you act and speak. However, during meetings or breaks, you must listen to your colleagues and take a different stance.

**WCO:** What would you say to women who are considering a career in Customs?

**Kanika Khim:** I'd tell them not to hesitate to join Customs. The work is diverse, interesting and even fun. You learn something new every day, and, if you come up with good ideas, your voice will be heard. Most importantly, you'll contribute to the development of your country and protect it from criminal activities.

**WCO:** Do you think people in Cambodia understand this role?

**Kanika Khim:** Not many people understand what Customs does, and neither do the government agencies we work with. We're currently developing communication material for other agencies so that they can understand how Customs operates. The Administration has a Facebook account where Customs actions are promoted, but being seen and heard by ordinary citizens remains a challenge.

**WCO:** How do you manage to balance family and professional life?

**Kanika Khim:** When I first started working, my parents moved in with me to help me take care of the children and the house. After work, I could therefore spend time with my family, helping my daughters with their homework or reading books to them.

Nowadays, the situation is a bit different because I have more responsibilities, and my parents are the ones who need help. But, once again, I've been lucky because my sister, who's a stay-at-home mum, lives nearby, and my husband and daughters help out a lot as well.

**WCO:** Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

**Kanika Khim:** I'd like to continue moving up the ladder. It's not about the money or the prestige. I want my voice to be better heard. I want to make use of my knowledge and contribute to the improvement of our practices. I also want to continue to learn. I just finished a Master's in Business Management, and tomorrow I'm defending my thesis on small and medium-sized enterprises and the obstacles they face. Gathering information from businesses was challenging, but I'm now much more familiar with their constraints and needs, particularly when moving goods across borders. This will enable me to be better at what I do and to look at issues from a different perspective.

**WCO:** Thank you for taking the time to share your story and your aspirations with us.

**Kanika Khim:** Thank you for inviting me to take part in this campaign.

