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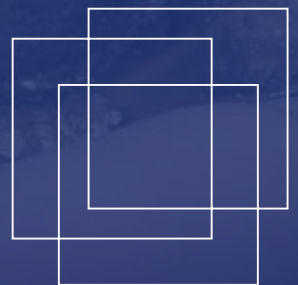
Stories of women in the Myanmar Garment Industry

Ma Winnie (Ma Win Ei Khine)

President, Maple Garment Factory.

Time in sector: 7 years

Time in position: 7 years



Since she was a child, Ma Winnie Khine had a strong interest in leading and mentoring. In fact, as soon as she passed her own university entrance exam, she began tutoring younger children as a hobby while she completed her English degree from Dagon University in Yangon. She also worked as a volunteer teacher at the YWCA during her holidays. Her father actively encouraged all his children to learn English and provided them with good English tuition. “I think that making sure they are fluent in English is one of the main ways I can support them,” he explained.

Once she had successfully completed her bachelor’s degree in Yangon, Ma Winnie then set off to further her education in Japan, earning a Master of Business Administration degree from Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo in International Corporate Strategy. After she returned to Myanmar, Ma Winnie enrolled in a production management training program provided by the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI). The training program was run in collaboration with the Association for Overseas Technical Cooperation and Sustainable Partnerships (AOTS/HIDA), an organisation that is funded by the Japanese government to provide technical training for people in developing countries.

The AOTS training was very helpful to Ma Winnie, as she had come back to Myanmar to help manage the family business, Maple garment factory, but didn’t yet have any direct experience working in the garment sector. “I had to learn some

topics, such as factory planning, that were not included in my master’s degree, so it was really good training for me.” The training obviously had an impact on Ma Winnie, as in 2008, she became the youngest winner of a story-writing competition to commemorate the 50th anniversary of AOTS and was awarded a prize by the wife of the Prime Minister of Japan.

Despite her impressive credentials, Ma Winnie didn’t find it easy when she first started her new role as manager of the Yangon based garment factory. The factory was in some financial difficulty at the time and production efficiency needed significant improvement. The factory employed many experienced workers, who were more senior in terms of their experience and tenure than the newcomer Ma Winnie. Neither the male nor female employees took her seriously when she first started.

“At that time, they didn’t want to accept my guidance or suggestions. They didn’t follow me because I was still a young girl in their eyes.”

But while Ma Winnie lacked experience at first, she brought a wealth of business and manufacturing knowledge into her factory from her studies at university and technical training. She spent a lot of her time in the first few months listening to her managers and workers, leveraging their knowledge to understand what the problems were and



to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the factory and the workers. She also reached out to seek the advice of experts and technicians from foreign factories, to see whether new methods and technology could help improve things at the factory. Her mother said that, “Gradually, the employees accepted her new ideas and plans. They could observe that things became more effective and more productive once her plans had been implemented.”

Bringing new ideas into the garment factory wasn’t always easy though. Ma Winnie’s parents sometimes disagreed with her over new ideas and initiatives, but ultimately they trusted her to implement the changes and encouraged her to succeed. Before Ma Winnie started at the factory, the prevailing view of the factory’s managers was that workers should not become too skilful in their work or they might leave to find employment somewhere else. Ma Winnie had a different point of view. She believed very strongly that the key to success for the factory was in training and nurturing the workers to achieve their maximum potential. An educated worker, she reasoned, would be happier, more productive and more loyal to the business.

Ma Winnie started to put her interest in mentoring others into good use at the factory. She began running capacity-building sessions in the factory to improve the skills of existing workers. She sent her managers and executive staff to Japan to learn about the latest technologies and techniques for improving quality and production. She also implemented a

regular sewing training program in the factory, to provide unskilled workers with the basic sewing skills they needed to start working in a garment factory. To ensure that trainees were treated fairly, Ma Winnie made sure they were paid a full basic salary while they attended the training course and received a certificate on completion. Many of the best trainees are offered jobs in the Maple garment factory and the certificates are highly regarded by other employers. Over time and with the help of her management team, Ma Winnie’s focus on skills development, employee retention and technical innovation has led to a doubling of production in the factory and a significant increase in profitability.

Another area where Ma Winnie is trying a new approach is in embracing gender diversity. Although sewing has traditionally been regarded as “woman’s work” in Myanmar, at Maple garment factory more than a third of employees are male. Work is not separated into “male” and “female” tasks in the factory. Instead, men and women are expected to work alongside each other to complete their tasks. And it is commonplace now to see men working on the sewing line. For Ma Winnie, the important thing is not gender, but rather whether a person has the skills and training needed to perform a task well.

In addition to managing the Maple garment factory, Ma Winnie also holds senior positions in a number of other businesses, including Streamline Training and Learning Centre which teaches English to young children, and Wai



Sithu International which is a diversified business that distributes major brands in Myanmar such as ESPRIT.

In order to cope with the stress of managing several businesses, Ma Winnie makes sure to take good care of her health. She ensures she has a good night's sleep to keep her mind clear and fresh for the challenges of the day ahead. She goes to the gym regularly to lift weights and attend dance classes. But one of her favourite ways to relieve stress is to draw. "When I feel very stressed, I draw. I think about the things that make me stressed, then let it go through the pencils onto the paper. And then, I feel relaxed." Ma Winnie also enjoys the support of her loving family, and she makes sure that no matter how busy she is during the rest of the week, every Sunday she dedicates to spending time together with them.

Ma Winnie and her mother are now working together on a new project to establish a childcare facility in the Maple garment factory to provide a pathway for mothers with young children to return to work. They believe this will encourage these skilled workers to continue working instead of leaving the workforce once they become pregnant. Recruiting and retaining skilled workers are important to maintain a competitive edge in the garment sector where turnover rates can be high. With this in mind, Ma Winnie provides employment opportunities to many people with disabilities in her factory. She explains that there are many tasks in the factory they can perform just as well as the other workers. She has plans to recruit more skilled people with disabilities in the future.

For women looking to make a professional career in the garment sector, Ma Winnie says the key challenge is education. Most employees in the sector don't have enough education and so they often lack the self-confidence and leadership skills to secure a professional position.

"To get a management level position, they must be able to think creatively and have other professional management skills."

Ma Winnie also points out that for many women in Myanmar, the garment industry is a logical choice because of the culture and because sewing is already a hobby they enjoy at home. And she welcomes any new female entrepreneurs in the garment sector. "I encourage female small business owners and always try to be a mentor for them. I try to give them advice to help them avoid some of the mistakes I might have made in the past."

This profile has been produced by Factive Consulting for the International Labour Organization's "Improving labour relations for decent work and sustainable development in the Myanmar garment industry" project (ILO-GIP). The ILO-GIP aims to reduce poverty and empower women in Myanmar by improving labour relations, social dialogue and gender equality in the garment industry. The project receives funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and H&M. For more information, visit: <https://bit.ly/ilo-gip>

