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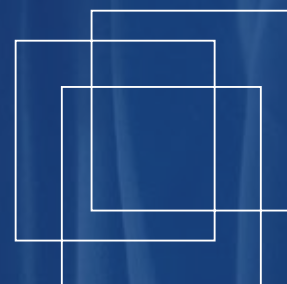
Stories of women in the Myanmar Garment Industry

Alena (Ma Aye Thiri Khaing)

Industrial Engineering Supervisor, Suzhou Silk.

Time in sector: 2.5 years

Time in position: 3 months



Alena didn't set out to be a trailblazer. She had a conventional life, living with her parents in a modest house about an hour away by bus from the factory where she now works. She did well at school, thanks in part to being a bright girl, but perhaps also because her mother took the education of her only child more seriously than most. When she started studying at Dagon University in 2011, her mother would often sit at the back of the classroom taking notes. This allowed her to learn at the same pace as her daughter and then sit with her at night time to help her with her studies. Alena is grateful for her mother's dedication to her education. She points out that none of her classmates' mothers went to such extraordinary lengths.

Her mother's dedication eventually paid off, and Alena graduated three years later having successfully completed a degree in biotechnology. After graduation, she was eager to find a job. She was unable to find anything suitable in Yangon that matched her qualifications, so she had to accept a job as a receptionist in a Japanese restaurant. Not content to accept her circumstances, Alena was determined to keep looking for better opportunities that would enable her to fulfil her potential and provide a suitable challenge. In the meantime, she attended English language classes to improve her prospects of finding a more skilled job.

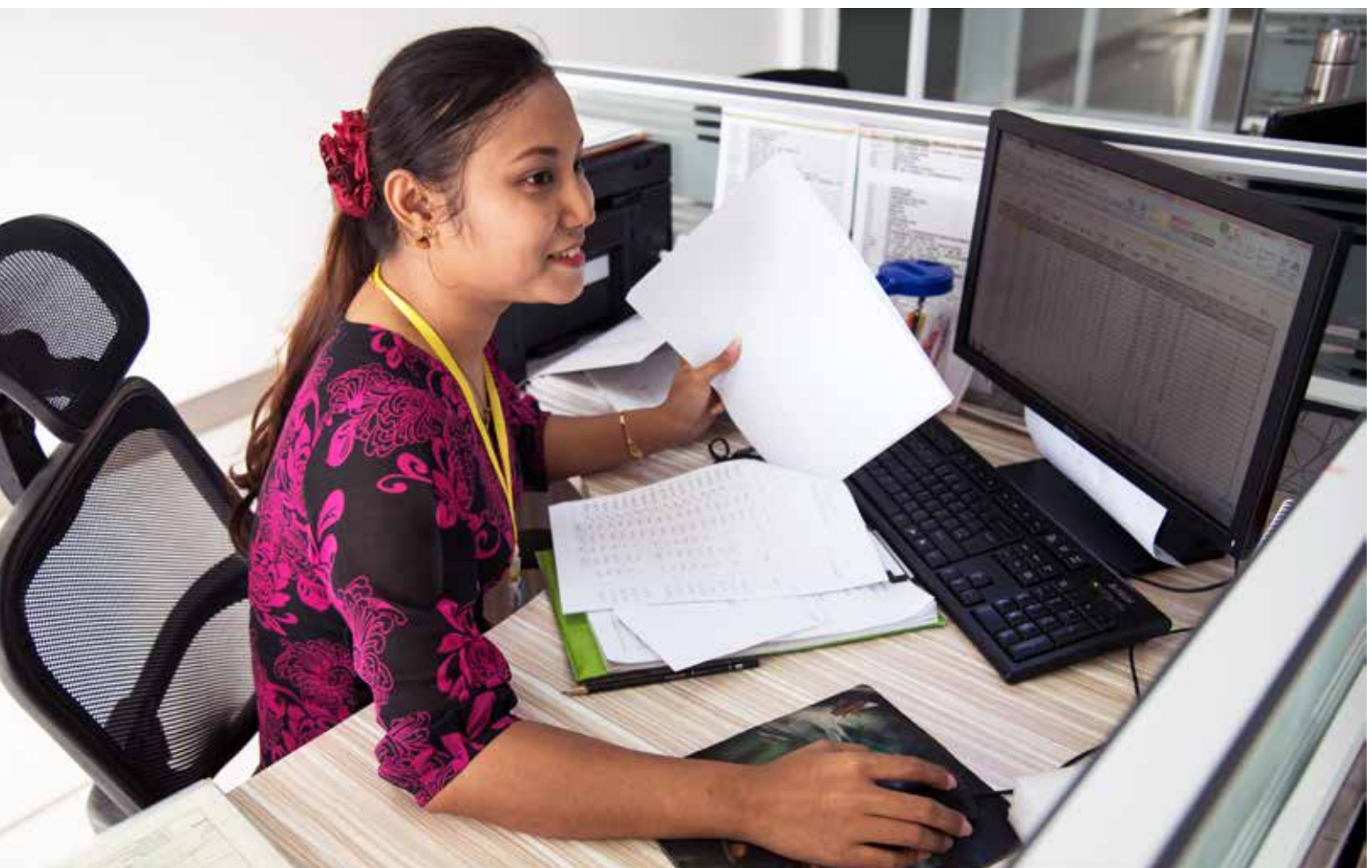
Before too long, a friend from her English class suggested to Alena that she should apply for a job as a translator in the garment sector. It wasn't biotechnology, but at least it

would be more interesting than her current job, and she could earn a better income than at the restaurant. Alena applied for the position and was successfully selected. She worked for two different garment factories over the next few years as a translator and gained valuable experience along the way. At the first of these factories, she met an inspiring woman from the Philippines, who would have a lasting influence on her future career.

Ms. Giralat was an industrial engineer. She was "very sharp, smart, and also taught me a lot," said Alena. She was one of the very few female industrial engineers working in Myanmar at that time. Similar to many people in Myanmar society up until that moment, Alena had always thought engineering jobs were exclusively for men.

"When I met Ms. Giralat, I suddenly realised that a woman can also become an engineer. It just depends on what we desire to do and the effort we put in, not our gender."

Alena realised at that moment she had the possibility to re-evaluate her career and pursue a career path traditionally regarded as unsuitable for women. Although she was a little worried about the consequences of working in a male-dominated post, she nonetheless began to study industrial engineering in her spare time while she worked in her job as



a translator. She read books in the evening and learned what she could from Ms. Giralat whenever an opportunity arose. With Ms. Giralat as her mentor, lots of interesting new things to learn and a newly discovered confidence to follow her ambitions, Alena had started on the pathway to her new career.

Two and a half years later, when a friend told her there was an industrial engineering job available at Suzhou Silk, Alena jumped at the opportunity to apply for it. Thanks to her diligent studies, language skills and previous experience in the sector, she was selected as the successful candidate.

Since starting in her new role, Alena has found the work challenging in many ways. Although she denies she has faced any direct discrimination, she knows she has to prove that she is capable of doing the job. Because she is new in her position, some of Alena's colleagues are still sceptical of her abilities. And because most of her engineering training was obtained through workplace experience with Ms. Giralat, she does not have the comfort of a university degree to help establish her credibility. But Alena remains undaunted by these challenges.

As part of her new job as an industrial engineer supervisor, Alena is responsible for calculating the amount of time it takes to produce a sample garment in the sewing lines, validating this calculation with the technical department, and then working with sewers to check whether the time calculation is accurate. It is complicated and technical

work. As Alena busily performs her duties—working on the computer, attending meetings and talking to her colleagues and sewers on the production line—she seems calm and focussed on her job. She says she puts in extra effort to demonstrate she can be more skilful in her job than her colleagues. While she may feel she has to prove her capability to others, Alena is clearly confident in her own abilities and takes pride in her accomplishments. She smiles when she explains how her work has resulted in improvements to production on the sewing lines. She is clearly a woman who loves her job.

“Initially, the men didn’t believe I could take responsibility for this role. But I will do the same work as them and prove my skills.”

Alena's career path in the garment sector is not a typical one for a woman in Myanmar. While she acknowledges that many women seek to work in the garment sector because it is considered to be a “suitable” job for a woman to earn her daily living expenses, the idea of working as a sewer in a factory is not appealing to her. She thinks many women work in the garment sector because it is relatively easy to find work there and because this is what is expected of them, not because it is what they particularly want to do. By the end of the day, they are often tired and do not want to put in the extra effort required to get a promotion or



transfer to a more skilled position. To be honest, Alena says, “I probably wouldn’t recommend that job to my daughter if I had children in the future. Unless she really loved sewing, of course.”

But Alena’s story demonstrates there are new career pathways opening up for women in the garment sector in Myanmar. And because the sector has such a large proportion of female workers, she thinks there may be more opportunities for women to hold senior positions in this sector compared with other more male-dominated industries, even in positions that have traditionally been occupied by men.

Alena worries that many Myanmar women are too traditional and afraid to change, although she suspects if there were more people like Ms. Girlat in the industry, the situation might be different. Alena herself is now one of a new breed of women in Myanmar, who are challenging conventional gender roles. She hopes someday she will inspire other women in her factory to aspire to non-traditional career pathways in the same way she was inspired.

By working in the garment factory, Alena has the chance to develop her knowledge and experience of industrial engineering processes. And to help expand her career horizons, Alena is currently studying Chinese and Japanese in her own time. She dreams one day of owning her own small garment factory and putting her skills to good use

there. Alena knows that to achieve this dream, she must continue to learn new skills and become increasingly proficient at her job. Perhaps one day she will also return to university to complete a degree in industrial engineering.

Alena encourages other women who seek her advice to follow their dreams and consider what might inspire them before they choose a job. Although she has only been in her position for a short time, she knows she has found something she loves to do. This gives her the motivation and energy to work hard and succeed. “If someone wants to become a clothing designer or a production manager, then they should try to have that position in mind from the start and work towards it, even if they start as a sewer. But don’t become a sewer if you dream of becoming a chef,” Alena jokes.

“If somebody asks me for advice about their career, I encourage them to always learn more and don’t be afraid of changes.”

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>

