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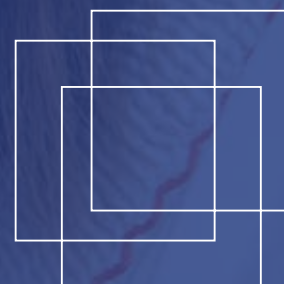
Stories of women in the Myanmar Garment Industry

Ma Tin Tin Hla (Ma Kaw Ni)

Production Manager, Maple Garment Factory.

Time in sector: 23 years

Time in position: 5 years



When Ma Tin Tin Hla first attempted to secure a job in the garment sector in 1995, she didn't even know how to sew. Twenty-three years later, she has worked her way up through the ranks to become a production manager, managing five sewing lines and serving as an inspiration for other women in her factory and community.

Despite being initially turned down at her first interview due to her lack of skills, Ma Tin Tin decided not to take no for an answer. She stood outside the interview room all day long, hoping for a second chance. A female manager was so impressed by this display of determination, she decided to give Ma Tin Tin a break and offered her an unskilled job as a helper, ironing garments.

Ma Tin Tin observed the skilled workers around her closely while she performed her duties as a helper. She learned enough to be able to fill in for sewers when they took a break and started to develop her own sewing skills. After only three months as a helper, Ma Tin Tin got a chance to work in a sewing line full time. She spent the next four years further developing her sewing skills and proving herself to be a diligent and hard-working employee, before being promoted to a team leader position. Three years later, she was promoted once more to a supervisory position. Ten years after that she was offered the role of production manager.

Like many women entering the garment sector, Ma Tin Tin received only a basic education and had limited opportunities to build a successful career. She viewed

working indoors in a garment factory as a respectable job that would allow her to earn a decent income to support herself and her family. Ma Tin Tin's family is proud of what she has accomplished. She is, after all, the first member of her family to have achieved a management position. Her family also views the garment factory, which employs mainly women, as a safe place for her to work.

“Among our relatives, she is the only one who has achieved a good working position.”

- Ma Tin Tin's brother

Financial independence is important to Ma Tin Tin. Her job has enabled her to buy her own house, which she shares with her brother, sister-in-law, two nieces and a nephew. It also allows her to provide ongoing support to her sister for rent, medical care and other necessities. Ma Tin Tin is very close to her extended family. They help and support each other in various ways. Her brother's family takes care of household chores while she is at work. Her brother, who is a carpenter, picks her up from the ferry bus-stop every day. Her sister-in-law makes a lunch box for her to bring to work.

Ma Tin Tin enjoys spending her home time cooking with her sister-in-law. She describes her brother's sense of humour as “hilarious.” Sometimes, she goes to the cinema to treat her nieces and nephew, or makes a trip to visit some of the famous pagodas around Myanmar. She worships Buddha twice a day and each day spends about 2000 MMK



(USD\$1.30) feeding the pigeons, a sincere act of generosity that reflects her Buddhist beliefs. Her faith also helps her manage any stress she may feel from time-to-time due to the pressures of her job.

Despite working long shifts, Ma Tin Tin clearly loves her work. She has great affection for her fellow workers and the factory owners, Aunty Kyawe and Ma Winnie, both of whom she regards as inspirational. When Ma Tin Tin assigns tasks to workers under her supervision, she always tries to communicate in a friendly way so they are happy about doing their work. The workers in the factory respect Ma Tin Tin and regard her with obvious warmth and friendship. Many of them say they feel inspired by her story and want to become a production manager like her one day.

Ma Tin Tin explains there are many reasons why women choose to work in the garment sector. The salary is higher than many other jobs and production bonuses are sometimes offered. There is a strong sense of community and the social environment has provided many opportunities for her to develop friendships and attend social events. All this makes it feel like she is a part of an extended family. There is also an opportunity to develop useful technical skills, especially for those workers who may not be literate or don't have a strong academic background. She acknowledges that the work is sometimes difficult, particularly at first when new workers don't yet have the skills necessary to perform all their tasks well. But she points out that with enough hard work and

determination, there is plenty of opportunity for promotion and success within the garment sector, even for someone like her who could not sew when she first started out.

Continuous learning is important to Ma Tin Tin. In her role as production manager, she experiences new challenges every day, which provide opportunities for her to learn and develop her skills. In addition to learning on the job, she has also received formal quality control training in Japan and communication and leadership skills training from the International Labour Organization. She regularly attends an English language class provided by her factory, hoping one day she can speak directly with foreign buyers to negotiate contracts. She hopes improving her language skills will provide her with access to more opportunities to attend training programs, which are sometimes only offered in English.

She is committed to sharing her knowledge and experience with others in her factory, so they too can develop their skills and perhaps one day earn a promotion.

“To work well as a team, we all need to support and help each other. We have to share our knowledge and techniques with the other workers, especially the new ones.”

The garment sector, although still largely female dominated,



is starting to see an increase in the number of male workers. Parents are starting to encourage their sons to apply for work in the sector. In the factory where Ma Tin Tin works, ideas about gender have also evolved over time. Ma Tin Tin has been able to employ some transgender women on the production line, something that has become possible due to changing attitudes in Myanmar society and a strong demand for skilled labour. She feels strongly that the skills and attitude of a person are the most important contributors to job performance and that embracing diversity is a way for her to find additional competent workers.

“I just want to offer a job to the person who has technical skills regardless of whether they are male, female, gay or transgender.”

Ma Tin Tin is often asked for advice from young people who are considering working in the garment sector. She encourages young people who want to pursue a career in the industry to give it a try. She explains there is more support nowadays for training and learning new skills. And working in a garment factory provides a pathway for unskilled people to develop their technical skills, earn a good income and become successful. But only if they are willing to work hard and put in the effort to learn new skills.

Ma Tin Tin balks at the suggestion that she is a role model for younger women. “I am still trying hard to become a role model!” But she does accept that her own story is a good

example of what can be achieved. “If I can do it, then they can too!”

Despite having already achieved a lot during her career at the Maple garment factory, Ma Tin Tin still has ambitions. She looks forward to the day when she can use her English language skills to negotiate her first contract with a foreign buyer and perhaps earn another promotion. She continues to find her own inspiration in the success of Aunty Kyawe, the factory owner, and Ma Winnie, the factory manager. Under the management of these successful women, many improvements have been made in the factory during the years she has worked there. And importantly, these women have encouraged Ma Tin Tin to achieve her goals by providing her with ongoing friendship, support and training. She is thankful to all her mentors and co-workers in the factory for contributing to the success she has enjoyed, but the most important advice she can give to new workers?

**“Work hard! Work hard!
Then anything is possible.”**

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>

