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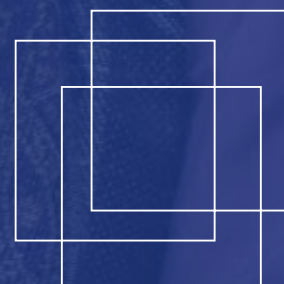
Stories of women in the Myanmar Garment Industry

Rosaline (Daw Khine Khine Nwe)

Owner, Best Industrial Co., Ltd.

Time in sector: 30 years

Time in position: 27 years



Rosaline is a woman who commands respect. It is not, however, the type of respect that might be demanded by way of a domineering personality or an aggressive management style. Instead, it is born from an understanding of just how much she has accomplished over the course of her career. At a sprightly sixty years old, she is a veteran of the garment industry and shows no sign of slowing down.

Her industry peers paid homage to her competence as a business leader by electing her to the position of Central Executive Committee (CEC) member of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI) in 2009 and Joint Secretary General of UMFCCI in 2011. She was the first woman elected to the Secretariat. She has also been re-elected for three terms in a row as a representative of the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA), of which she is Secretary General.

At UMFCCI, Rosaline heads the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Committee. For six years, she was the Employer's Delegate to the International Labour Conference, the general assembly of the International Labour Organization. She is also a Trustee on the Board of ASEAN CSR Network, a Board member of the United Nations Global Compact Network Myanmar, Board member of the Myanmar Institute of Directors and Chairperson of Myanmar Garment Human Resource Development Center, a training facility that teaches sewing and supervisory skills. In her spare time, Rosaline somehow also fills the role of Managing Director of her garment factory, Best Industrial Co., Ltd.

Her curriculum vitae leaves absolutely no doubt that Rosaline is a capable, talented and busy individual. But when asked to consider whether she is a role model for younger women, she doesn't provide a direct answer. Instead, she points out that her philosophy has always been to evaluate her success against herself and not to compare herself with others.

“I often ask myself, what about me has changed in the past five years or the past ten years, and how much have I improved? That is how I have always measured my success.”

Rosaline inadvertently began her career in the garment industry in 1986 when, she took a job working in the offices of Daewoo Industrial Co., a diversified South Korean based company that had recently started investing in Myanmar's garment sector. Although she had studied for a Master's degree in Zoology at Yangon University and completed her research thesis in the Department of Medical Research, Rosaline saw the Daewoo job as an opportunity to gain some valuable work experience. She didn't realise it at the time, but this job would help set the trajectory for her future career in the garment sector.

After two years working for Daewoo, Rosaline made the decision to return to academic life. In 1988, she set off for Thailand to take up a position teaching business English at Assumption University in Bangkok. After working at the university for two years, Rosaline set off once more, this



time to the United States, where she hoped to study for a PhD. Unfortunately, tragedy struck when Rosaline fell ill not long after arriving in the United States. She returned to Bangkok for a short time to resume her teaching position, but in 1991 she decided to return to Myanmar to rejoin her family and to recuperate her health.

On her return to Myanmar, Rosaline put her academic career on hold. She secured an administrative position with her former employer Daewoo in a newly built factory in the Pyin-Ma-Bin industrial zone. Rosaline soon realised she had left her interest in medical research fully behind her and embraced her new career in the garment sector. Still, she discovered that the research skills she had acquired from her academic experience would prove useful time after time in her future career.

Working at the factory proved to be a valuable learning experience for Rosaline. “When I worked in the office, I had to work with every department and so I learned all the processes from a variety of perspectives. And when I started working in the factory, I learned to understand the difficulties of the workers from both the production sector and office sector.” Rosaline’s mentor at this time recognised her potential and encouraged her to start her own business.

“My mentor told me that if I became successful, I could follow my own dreams and try out my own ideas. I liked the idea so much that I decided to do it.”

Rosaline used her savings to buy twenty sewing machines and recruited her first few workers. Once she had ventured into the competitive world of business, there was no turning back. She came up with an innovative idea to buy batches of discarded clothing from the large garment factories and repair them so they could be upcycled. She recognised that this form of recycling was not only important to reduce waste, but was also potentially valuable for her company. By combining her broad range of garment industry experience from her time at Daewoo with her systematic research skills from university, she had devised a system to transform waste into profit.

As her business began to prosper and the number of workers in her business began to grow, Rosaline and her business partners established a joint venture company, Best Industrial Co., Ltd. in 1994. Economic sanctions against Myanmar made business conditions difficult over the next few years. But while others were quick to exit the garment industry during this time, Rosaline had faith in her business and the sector and continued to invest her time, money and effort into making her business a success.

Despite never starting out with the idea of working in the garment sector, she has managed to establish an incredibly successful career for herself in the sector. Her advice to young people? “Even if you don’t get the chance to pursue your childhood interests, life does not end. With goodwill and much effort, you can make a success of any career.”



Rosaline has a very busy schedule. At the start of each day, she checks her work plan to schedule her activities and prioritise her workload. She often stays at work until nine or ten o'clock in the evening to fulfil her many responsibilities. Her staff know how busy she is and regularly have to remind her to eat something or take a break. "My staff are very helpful to me," says Rosaline, with obvious gratitude for their support.

When Rosaline is asked about what training she has received that allows her to be so successful in her job, she replies that she has had many mentors, including both her family and teachers. She acknowledges the core skills she learnt at university, which enable her to think creatively and research new ideas and technologies. She also mentions her formative time at Daewoo, where she obtained a broad knowledge of the garment industry, as well as the production management training she received at AOTS Training Center in Japan and through MGMA.

Her family taught her important lessons that have stayed with her. She was taught from a young age to speak her mind, a lesson she has taken to heart. It has earned her a good reputation as someone willing to speak plainly and express her opinions. She believes the key to being accepted by her predominantly male colleagues in senior roles is "being an open-minded person and speaking my mind openly." This attitude has helped her in her professional life, where being able to communicate directly with colleagues, workers, suppliers and customers is an essential skill.

Rosaline feels strongly that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing properly. She invests the time it takes to instruct her workers properly. "I always prefer doing the very best job that I can do, rather than rush to finish something in a limited time frame." This is something she has decided for herself, not something she was taught at school or by her parents. Rosaline applies the same logic when asked about how long she intends to stay in her position. "I don't like to set time boundaries on things. Perhaps until I am satisfied that I have done the best work I can do."

And for young women just starting in the industry? Rosaline explains that even those with a poor education can succeed.

"In a garment factory, the worker who passed only elementary or middle school can become a supervisor. There are many opportunities here for women who are willing to work hard."

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>

