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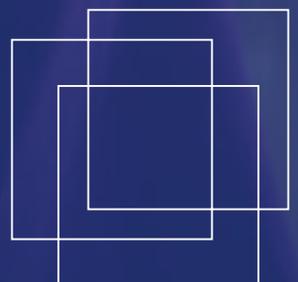
## Stories of women in the Myanmar Garment Industry

### Ma Khaing Zar Aung

President, Industrial Worker's Federation of Myanmar (IWFM).

Time in sector: 18 years

Time in position: 5 years



At only thirty-four years old, Ma Khaing Zar Aung has seen the good, the bad and the ugly side of the garment sector. Today, she is the President of the Industrial Worker's Federation of Myanmar (IWF), but she didn't set out to become a champion for workers' rights.

Ma Khaing Zar grew up in Kyauktan Township in the south of Yangon, the fifth of eight siblings. Her family struggled to meet their daily living expenses, so when Ma Khaing Zar completed high school, she moved to the Thaketa Industrial Zone to find work in a garment factory to help support them. Over the next few years, Ma Khaing Zar worked several different jobs in the garment sector while she struggled to complete a bachelor's degree in economics by distance education. She worked for some time in the STEP garment factory, then spent a year working in a railway station.

As a youth, she was always looking to improve her education and find new opportunities to develop her career. But in Myanmar at that time, she found very few opportunities for skilled work. The same unskilled jobs seemed to be on offer no matter how much time or effort she put into her education. There didn't seem to be much opportunity in the garment sector for an educated woman.

When Ma Khaing Zar entered the workforce in 2001, Myanmar was still firmly under military rule. The political reforms towards democracy that were to begin ten years later were still in the distant future. Trade unions were banned under the military regime and many union leaders had been

imprisoned or exiled from Myanmar, although some union leaders continued to secretly work from border locations. Ma Khaing Zar soon discovered for herself the reality that working conditions within Myanmar were very difficult.

**“In Myanmar, the workers got only one holiday per month and they worked 13 to 15 hours per day at that time. But the salary was very low. We didn't know workers' rights and there was no labour organisation in Myanmar.”**

Once Ma Khaing Zar completed her degree, she looked around for new work opportunities with better working conditions and a higher salary. She was excited when a colleague she had first met in a garment factory in Yangon came home for a short visit after working away in Thailand. This colleague told Ma Khaing Zar about her experiences working in a garment factory in the Mae Sai district on the border with Thailand, where working conditions were somewhat better than in Yangon.

Ma Khaing Zar was determined to improve her situation, so she decided to leave Yangon and travel with her colleague when she departed for Thailand once more. Although Ma Khaing Zar's parents were worried about their daughter travelling to the Thai border at only twenty years of age, they reluctantly agreed to let her go, somewhat reassured by the fact she was travelling with her friend.



Shortly after starting work in a garment factory in Mae Sai, Ma Khaing Zar started talking with other workers about the long working hours and low salary in Myanmar. A new friend who had been working in Thailand for about seven years told her, "On our day off, I'll take you to a training class to listen a discussion about these issues." Ma Khaing Zar agreed and went along with her to the class. The discussion was run by the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB).

Ma Khaing Zar was very interested in listening to the discussion about the root causes of poverty and how to achieve better conditions for workers. "I thought the trainer would know how to solve these issues in Myanmar. I attended training every week and learned a lot from the trainers. I was enthusiastic to implement their ideas once I returned to Myanmar. I didn't want to work on the Thai border forever. I had already decided to go back to Myanmar." But the political situation back home meant that Ma Khaing Zar would not return for some time.

Before she moved to the Thai border, Ma Khaing Zar never really had an interest in politics. But she soon learned that joining a union was considered to be a political activity and not without difficulty. Over time, Ma Khaing Zar began participating more fully in union activities. She helped out whenever she could and conducted training for migrant workers. Ultimately she was sentenced to prison twice in Thailand because of her union involvement.

It was while she was in prison for the second time that a man called U Maung Maung came to visit her and invited her to come and work with him at his organisation, the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB). Although she had never met him before, it turned out that U Maung Maung was a key leader in the Burmese pro-democracy movement. He later became the President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM). Working for the NCUB in their office on the Thai border, she learned a lot more about politics. She engaged in many political discussions with her colleagues and learned a lot about how to organise and run a trade union, as well as how to advocate for better working conditions.

These experiences with U Maung Maung and the NCUB were formative for Ma Khaing Zar. She discovered her attitude towards her career had changed. Instead of seeking a better position and salary for herself, she began to care more deeply about achieving better conditions for all workers in Myanmar. It was this realisation that inspired her to set up IWFM and dedicate the rest of her life towards improving working conditions for union members and workers.

### **"I will work this job as long as I live my life."**

Today, Ma Khaing Zar lives in a rental house near her office in Yangon, together with her younger sister and elder brother. Her brother often does the cooking to make life a little easier for his busy sisters. Ma Khaing Zar visits her relatives back in Kyauktan Township as often as her busy schedule allows, but not as often as she would like. Her mother is clearly proud



of her achievements. “She has a noble job, because she is helping others. We are proud of her so much.”

When asked about the future in Myanmar, Ma Khaing Zar has a positive vision. She would like to see government policies offer greater protections and benefits for workers. And she would like to see better relationships and communication between employers and workers. She sees this as critical for the economic advancement of her country. “I want to help the workers as much as I can and lobby the government to make policy changes to give a suitable solution for every problem that workers and employers face.”

Ma Khaing Zar says that it is not always easy being a woman in a leadership position. Working with the ministers and government departments often involves dealing with older men in positions of authority, who sometimes have difficulty accepting advice from a young woman such as herself. She accepts that a young man in her position would also face some difficulty, but she believes he would not have to work so hard to earn respect.

**“Women have to put much more effort into lobbying than men. Because it is easier for men to be taken seriously by other men.”**

She emphasises the importance of being well prepared and relying on solid data and case study results to argue her case. “I always review my meeting appointments at least one week in advance to make sure I am prepared for what I have to do.”

Although she believes there is a positive future for women in the garment sector, she encourages workers to consider joining a labour organisation to ensure they have support if any employment issues should arise. She explains that not all employers abide by labour laws, and it is often difficult for individual workers to resolve these issues by themselves. “Labour organisations can help protect those workers who were unfairly fired from their job and those who get injured at work.”

One place where Ma Khaing Zar sees room for improvement in the garment sector is in reducing long working hours to a more reasonable level. She believes this will allow workers more time to access learning opportunities, which can help them to advance their careers. She points out that it is often the case that women don’t realise what career opportunities actually exist until they enter the workforce.

**“We gradually come to realise the opportunities from our working experiences and then we can choose what we want for our career life.”**

*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>*

