



*Sharing experiences,
getting involved – the
Sunday Café in Hlaing
Thayar is a popular
place to go for garment
workers at their day off.*

Sunday Cafés and Women’s Center: Empowering garment workers in Myanmar

The story of Myanmar garment workers

The fashion industry is booming. It’s foremost the low cost and high production capacities of Asian countries making this boom possible. To be precise, it’s foremost women making this boom possible. More than 90 percent of Myanmar’s 400,000 garment workers are women, mostly between 16 and 27 years old.

This is their story: Everyday, hundreds of unskilled women come from the rural areas to the city, starting to work in one of the 400 or so garment factories. Since the poverty rate amounts to almost 40 percent in Myanmar, the income generated by these women is urgently needed to support their families. Moreover, working in a garment factory is often the only possibility for young women from rural areas to earn money and become economically independent.

However, this opportunity is also a major challenge: Organizing daily life without a family network and dealing with harsh

working conditions in the factories. Very often, the women know little about their legal rights and thus may easily fall into a vicious circle of exploitation and debt.

What does it need to support the women workers?

The prerequisite for garment workers to be able to claim their rights is to know about their rights. In the next step, the workers must be enabled and encouraged to stand in for their rights. This is the mission supported by the regional project “Social and Labour Standards in the Textile and Garment Sector in Asia” (SLSG), which is implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. In Myanmar, the project cooperates closely with SMART Myanmar, an EU funded project led by sequa g GmbH, Germany.

A safe haven for personal development

A report on Myanmar by the International Labour Organisation reveals that a protected space for exchange is vital for empowering women and building their capacities. The two so-called Sunday Cafés and the Women’s Center of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM), which are supported by the GIZ SLSG programme in cooperation with sequa g GmbH, provide such a safe haven for women workers in the garment and textile industry in Myanmar.

Women can meet at these spaces, talk about their problems at work and learn more about their rights through trainings, games and peer counseling. In addition, the CTUM Women’s Centre is embedded in trade union structures. In cases of disputes, women can directly contact the relevant structures at CTUM for support to solve the conflict in the factory.

The spaces have been developed and advertised in cooperation with the Myanmar civil society organization Thone Pan Hla and CTUM, respectively. The two organizations exchange regularly and use synergies: While conflict mediation and industrial relations are CTUM’s expertise, providing life skills training for women is one of the core competences of Thone Pan Hla.

To generate income for maintaining the Sunday Cafés and to further support workers, Thone Pan Hla offers hostels for young women from the villages and rents the community center space to the workers for family celebrations. The CTUM Women’s Centre markets the center during the week as function room with catering services.

The story of Wai Wai Phuu



Wai Wai Phuu moved to Yangon in 2011. She wanted to generate more income than she could get from her job in the small grocery shop in her Township in Ayeyarwaddy Division. After having worked for several years as an unskilled worker in a few factories, she attended a training

course for sewers at the Aung Myin Hmu Training Center in Hlaing Tharyar in 2017. There she came to know about the Sunday Café. Once Wai Wai visited the café, she immediately felt at home. She started to support Thone Pan Hla, engaging at their women’s empowerment events on public holidays. She also decided to move to one of the hostels attached to the Sunday Cafés, enjoying the safe and clean living space. Today, Wai Wai has managed to be paid as a grade “A” sewer, working at Nadia Pacific Apparel. It is the highest salary level that sewers can reach.

“The Sunday Café is great for women garment workers. I got all work-related knowledge I needed to improve my situation. My favorite activity is to organize events. It’s a lot of fun. I love the team spirit.”

Wai Wai Phuu



At the opening ceremony of the CTUM Women’s Centre trade unionists and centre managers show their joy with the finger-heart gesture.

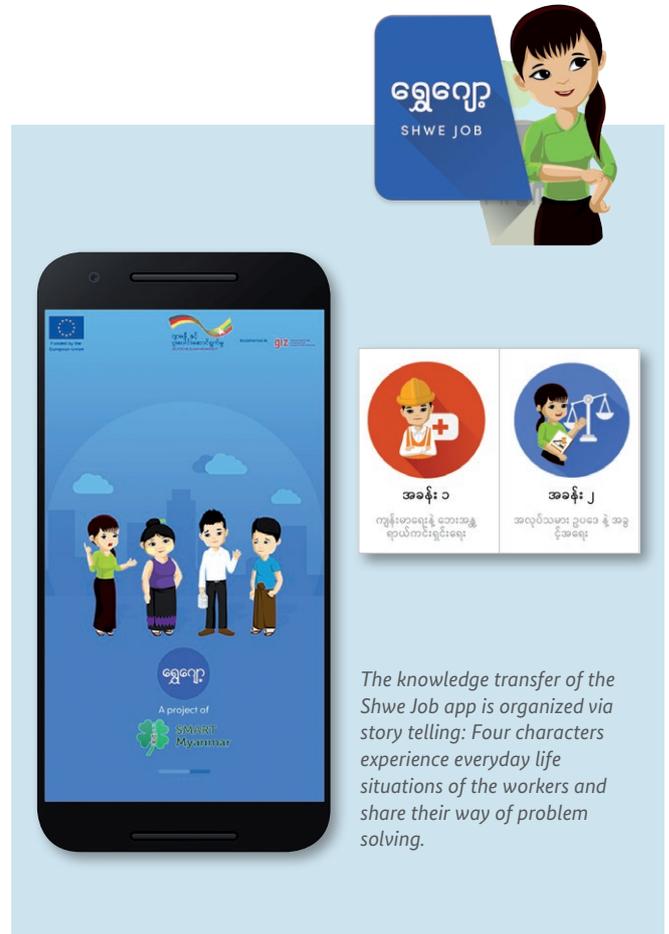


Digitalisation for empowerment

The activities at the Centers are complemented and amplified by two additional measures. Firstly, the workers can make use of legal counseling and mediation services to enable them to actively address their problems, supporting them to be independent and self-reliant. Secondly, two mobile apps ensure that the women expand their knowledge about labour laws and social standards.

The first app, called Shwe Job (golden job), presents the most important rights and duties at work in an easily understandable form and language.

The second app, called Satyone Superstar (factory superstar), queries the content of the first app via an interactive game taking place in a factory. The concept behind it: Give the target group not only what it needs, but also what it wants. After six long working days in the factory the women want to rest and recover. A game that invites users to have fun is therefore a sensible addition to the information app.



The knowledge transfer of the Shwe Job app is organized via story telling: Four characters experience everyday life situations of the workers and share their way of problem solving.



Satyone Superstar takes place in a factory. The game is designed in such a way that users can only advance if they are able to answer questions and solve tasks regarding labour laws and occupational health and safety.



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Results



Between **50 and 200 female workers** visit each of the three spaces in Hlaing Tharyar and Shwe Pyi Thar, Yangon, every Sunday and on public holidays. Annually, each has more than 5,000 visitors.



A core group of **40 management staff** including Thone Pan Hla managers, staff of the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA), SMART Myanmar staff as well as CTUM organizers have successfully completed the Train the Trainers legal course. They advise the garment workers on basic legal questions in the Cafés and at the Center. This core group also gives advice to factory owners and managers on labour issues.



The Shwe Job app has registered about **9,000 downloads** since May 2017. The app is also popular with users on Facebook through an educational campaign, currently with more than 75,000 likes.



10,000 workers, of which 84 percent are female, were reached by introducing Shwe Job in trainings in ten garment factories.



300 graduates from the Aung Myin Hmu Garment Skills Training Centre for garment workers were trained on occupational health and safety and human resources practices using the Shwe Job app.



In 2017 and 2018, more than **90,000 female workers** have been informed about the basics of the labour laws.



The game app Satyone Superstar, introduced in February 2018, has reached more than **3,000 downloads** so far.

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