

**Meena makes it matter: A role model for girls in Bangladesh**

By Frederike Seidel

She is nine years old, speaks more than a dozen languages and is a star throughout much of South Asia. Her name is Meena and she's a cartoon character turned role model for kids. Dreamed up by one of UNICEF's communication officers, Meena has become a key weapon in the battle against gender and social inequity in South Asia.

In Bangladesh, where she was 'born', she is loved by girls, boys and adults in every village and town. Ask children in any class in any school who their favourite cartoon persona is and you are likely to hear them shout: "Meena! Meena! Meena!" This star is neither rich nor glamorous. She is, quite simply, a typical village girl.

Eleven-year-old Chitty, from a village near Tangail, looks just like her storybook mentor. "I love Meena and her parrot, Mithu. Since my parents started watching her stories on TV as well, I get as much food as my brothers," she says. This means a lot in Bangladesh, where girls often receive smaller portions at meal times than their brothers. In most Meena cartoons the message on gender equality is not explicit but clear enough so that children and their parents can figure out the meaning themselves.

In the episode 'Dividing the mango', Meena introduces the game 'swap roles', in which her brother agrees to take on all her tasks for one day: lighting the fire, sweeping the yard, feeding the chickens and milking the cow. By the end, little Raju is exhausted and volunteers to share all his food equally with his sister in the future.

Oli, 11, in the same class as Chitty, knows most of the episodes by heart and proudly recites one – 'birds can fly' – in front of his peers. In this tale, Meena and Raju discover a nest with two birds. Raju asks his sister which one is a girl and which one a boy, to which she replies, "Don't worry, both of them will fly."

Asked by the teacher why he likes the story, Oli answers, "Because for us children it's the same as with the birds, boys and girls can do the same things, even if we can't fly." You might guess his favourite character would be Raju, but surprisingly, it is not. "I like Meena best, she is so much fun," he says. Does he resent sharing mangoes with his sisters in an equal way, as suggested by Meena? "I don't think we boys should get more food or more education. I think Meena is right," he replies.

In the village of Mirzapur, Jaharna, an illiterate woman of around 30 with five children, heads straight for the UNICEF project officer, who is on a routine visit. She had recognized the UNICEF logo on his car from the Meena cartoons. "I love Meena. I would like my daughters to be like her! I want them to study and become real ladies, not someone like me," she says. "I have to follow orders all day as a maid. Sometimes I skip work to see the Meena stories on TV," she admits.

"You know, I sometimes tell my children to play Meena's game 'swap roles'" she says. "And because of her, I send all of them to school, including the girls." Doesn't her

husband object? “My husband also likes Meena. She is so great, she has conquered our hearts,” Jaharna says.

In the 16 Meena stories that UNICEF has scripted so far, the little girl and her family tackle tough social issues such as child marriage, illegal dowry demands, and parents refusing to send their daughters to school. She has even confronted challenges like HIV/AIDS, child abuse and domestic child labour, delivering messages that sensitize children and their parents, helping them to understand their rights. “Because of Meena videos and print materials, many difficult issues are much easier to explain,” says Chitty’s and Oli’s teacher. She also refers to Meena whenever she has problems with discipline in class, while mothers and fathers often use her as an example to get their children to wash their hands before meals.

Meena has not only moved into mainstream education, but her popularity has also caught the interest of Government ministries who now have a hand in her development.

In the late 1990s, UNICEF invited key people from the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education to pitch in ideas for new Meena storybooks. In 2000, when Bangladesh’s National Curriculum and Textbook Board set about revising English-language primary and secondary school textbooks, UNICEF was invited to explore how Meena might be included, to teach child rights and health-related issues. UNICEF has also put together a training package for head teachers to promote the most effective use of Meena material.

The adventures of Meena, Raju and Mithu are now read by around 6.3 million schoolchildren every day in Bangladesh.

The power of Meena can best be illustrated by the flood of letters and phone calls to the UNICEF office in Dhaka. “Yesterday again, a nine-year-old boy called and wanted to speak to Meena,” says Mira Mitra, UNICEF programme communication officer. “I carefully tried to explain to him that she is only a cartoon character and not a real person.”

To keep the cartoon girl current, UNICEF develops every new episode through focus-group research. In-depth interviews are carried out with hundreds of girls and boys, their parents and community members. Following a survey in 1999 to find out who identified with Meena, UNICEF created new material representing a wider variety of backgrounds, including, for instance, children with disabilities. In 2002, UNICEF and the Ministry of Education<sup>1</sup> launched a story-writing competition in all primary schools, asking children to write their own Meena tales. The response was overwhelming, and many of the pupils’ ideas are now finding their way into new Meena series.

The Meena Communication Initiative (MCI) started out with its focus squarely on South Asia – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. It soon became apparent, however, that Meena’s appeal extended much further. Since 1998, the nine-year-old girl has been

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<sup>1</sup> IDEAL Project (Intensive District Approach to Education for All of the Directorate of Primary Education).

introduced in Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Maldives, Thailand, Viet Nam and Sri Lanka – with the content tailor-made for each place and always incorporating children’s ideas.

“Meena has become a phenomenon throughout South Asia. She is now part of the culture of many countries in this region,” says Nuzhat Shahzadi, who coordinates all Meena activities in UNICEF’s Regional Office for South Asia in Nepal. However, Nuzhat warns that a lack of funds threatens to put a cap on Meena activities, such as the production of education materials. “Although UNICEF’s financial investment in MCI is modest, it is crucial to keeping Meena alive,” Nuzhat stresses.

“The great thing is that Meena has helped to make UNICEF even more a part of society in all these countries,” says Neill McKee, who invented the Meena character in 1990. “UNICEF programmes reach children almost everywhere, from the most remote villages to key stakeholders in government offices. Meena was just a dream in my mind but a regional team of UNICEF people and partners made it come true,” he said.

When his assignment ended in Dhaka, Neill, a communication officer, was posted to UNICEF’s office in Nairobi. There, he crafted the African cartoon girl ‘Sara’, who is now becoming very popular in many sub-Saharan countries – but that’s another story.

Letters to Meena received by the UNICEF office in Bangladesh:

“I am Meena's friend. I want more Meena story books and cartoons, otherwise I will not study. Regards, Tabassum (girls' name), grade 1.”

“Dear Director,

Take my greetings. I am a parent and housewife. My children have profound admiration for Meena. They become very busy when they see Meena on television. I always make them work by telling about Meena. If I tell about Meena they all listen. For example, hand wash, nail cutting, etc. If you have more materials, please send to me so that they can read. Best wishes, Ms. Shamim Bilkis (mother), Sylhet District.”

“Dear Sir,

I am a fan of Meena. Not only me, but my brother, sister and everybody. We all watch Meena episodes, produced with good stories, and enjoy. Meena is not only a cartoon character for children but presents many good examples that are extraordinary. In the meantime I have learnt that I will be able to learn more on Meena from you. For that I am very happy. I am eager to learn more on Meena. Please write more on Meena after you receive this letter. Please please please reply to this letter. I want to build my life like Meena. Sterling (boy), Comilla District.”

Although most children in Bangladesh can watch other cartoons on TV like Mickey Mouse or Batman, Meena is by far the most popular cartoon. She has become a role model in cities, slums and rural areas.

- The Bangladesh National TV channel shows Meena episodes for 25 minutes almost every day.
- Since 1993, municipalities<sup>2</sup> in rural and urban areas are showing Meena films using huge screens at public events. It is estimated that more than 3 million people have seen Meena films through this medium.
- Large billboards display Meena pictures and slogans in prominent positions in urban centres, promoting the girl child and other UNICEF priorities.
- In 1998, the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia launched Meena Day. Since then the Day is observed in Bangladesh every year. The day is celebrated at national and district level, with shows, debates, plays and songs in towns and villages.
- Meena characters are used on admission forms by many schools throughout the country to encourage enrolment.
- Many NGOs working with children use Meena stories for booklets adapted to their particular programmes and in textbooks, for example Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee for their work in non-formal primary schools throughout the country.
- Altogether, since Meena's 'birth' in the early 90's, it is estimated that more than 20 million copies of each story and activity book were distributed in Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup> through the Department of Mass Communication of the Ministry of Information.