

On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 5: The Girl Child

From the AP Editorial Desk

How a carefully-chosen cartoon character has become a role model for girls

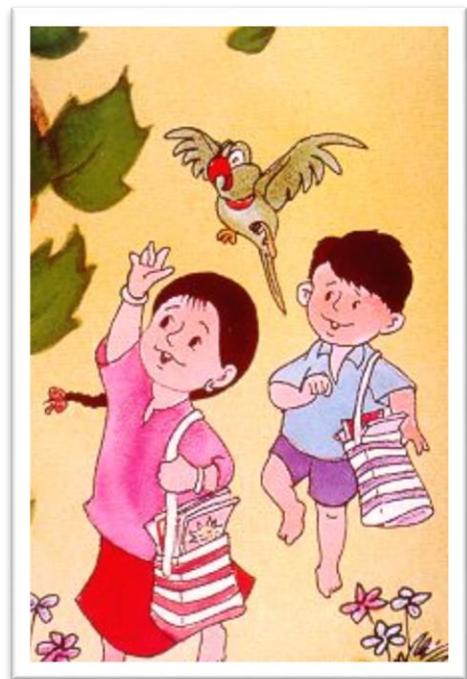
When Meena couldn't go to school because her parents wouldn't let her, she persuaded her male friend, Mitu, to teach her the basic math and language skills that he learns every day at school.

Meena practices her new skills by counting her father's chickens. One day, she notices that a chicken is missing and when she sees a thief running off with it, she alerts her father. The chicken is retrieved, the thief is apprehended and Meena becomes the village hero. When passers-by learn how Meena has saved the day, they rave about the benefits of sending girls to school. One couple says that their daughter now runs her own poultry business and is better able to provide for her family. Another couple notes that because their daughter finished primary school, she can keep in touch through letters.

UNICEF would like every Indian girl (and boy) to act like Meena. But Meena is not a real girl, she's an animated character and Mitu is her trusted sidekick - a gender-conscious parrot who sits comfortably perched on Meena's shoulder, forever looking out for his beloved owner.

Meena was launched by UNICEF South Asia in 1998 as a 13-part animation series broadcast by both private and public channels such as Doordarshan and All India radio. The series is also used as a teaching aid in schools across the region. It has taken on a huge range of subjects: equal food portions for boys and girls; first-aid for babies with diarrhea; everyday sanitary habits; how to keep girls in school; microcredit for women; resisting dowry demands or child marriage; restraining school bullies; and providing health care for girls and women.

UNICEF organizers were careful not to make Meena's name or persona too culturally specific. Meena is as common a name among Pakistani or Bangladeshi Muslims as it is among Indian or Nepali Hindus. Special attention was also given to Meena's physical appearance so that she



looked South Asian but could not be identified with only one country. In order to get this composite picture, UNICEF surveyed 2,500 people throughout South Asia and asked artists across the region to draw their own versions of the Meena character.

UNICEF has trained NGOs to conduct community-based workshops before and after film screenings. The target audience for the series was not only children, but the adults who often make decisions about young people in a community. The goal was to change behavior in the family and throughout the community.

Training materials and Meena episodes were translated into dozens of local languages. Interactive activities such as quiz competitions, essay contests, rallies, sporting events, camps and children's art exhibitions were promoted to actively involve young people in understanding the role that gender plays in their lives.

Meena met the Global Movement for Children when the Movement was launched last year. More than three thousand children gathered in New Delhi's Talkatora indoor sports and entertainment stadium to celebrate the girl child and to 'Say Yes' for children. The occasion was India's "Meena" Day celebration, which is part of an annual "girl child week" that aims to raise awareness about the plight of women and girls in India.

The occasion showed UNICEF staff in India that the Global Movement for Children can provide a tremendous opportunity to mobilize more support, not only for the rights of girl children but children in general. "We couldn't accommodate all the children who wanted to attend," says UNICEF Communications Associate, Renu Ghosh.

The cultural programs staged by the children were such a hit that the show went overtime and lasted a total of six hours.

Playing for Real

The Meena initiative has reached out beyond the still limited number of Indians who have access to television and radio. Plays and puppet versions of the Meena series have been staged in states such as Bihar, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh where poor infrastructure often means that electricity and schools are the exception, rather than the rule.



UNICEF worked through the government's division of Integrated Child Development Services, which reaches seventy percent of under-developed rural and urban areas. Anganwadi (day care) workers were also trained to show and discuss Meena films to the poor and underprivileged children they look after. So far, more than 18,000 anganwadi workers have been trained to impart gender sensitivity lessons to children



through the Meena Initiative. As a result, 20,000 community-based discussion groups have been set up around the country.



Leave no Child Out

- There are 933 females per 1000 males in India. The "missing girls and women" can be attributed to discriminatory gender practices such as female foeticide, female infanticide, sexual trafficking and dowry death
- One-fourth of Indian girls do not live past the age of fifteen and one-third of these deaths occur before a girl reaches her first birthday
- The childhood mortality rate for Indian girls is 20 percent higher than it is for boys
- Nearly two in every three women in India are illiterate
- The female literacy rate is 54 percent
- Only 82 girls for every 100 boys are enrolled in school. 35 million girls do not attend school in India.
- 52 percent of women are anemic and the maternal mortality rate is 540 per 100,000
- Some 60 percent of Indian prostitutes are from the so-called backward castes. Of the two million women in commercial sex work in India, approximately 30 percent are below the age of 18
- Almost half of all girls aged 20-24 years were married before they reached the age of 18

UNICEF has also mobilized the more than 300,000 youth clubs that fall under the national Ministry of Youth Affairs, to include more gender conscious programming in their activities. The Song and Drama Division of the Indian government's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was involved to help spread the word about Meena through the community-based mediums of drama, entertainment and folk traditions, that it has long supported.

Meena clubs, in which children are able to organize themselves and voice their concerns, were formed around the country. Local village councils, known as panchayats, are also using Meena materials to advocate for change on behalf of the girl child.

In West Bengal, a musical was composed to demonstrate the transformation of a girl character called Arna (a Bengali word for 'no more') into "Meena," which means jewel. The performance dramatizes the struggle of Arna to overcome all stereotypes and obstacles related to her gender.

In the northwest state of Bihar, one of the most impoverished and under-developed in the country, the Meena Initiative led to the establishment of Bal Samachar, a newspaper that covers gender and is written by and for children.

In spite of all the consciousness raising and mobilization of the Meena Initiative, activists say very little has improved for girls and women in India.

The statistics show that much more needs to be done to improve the country's gender imbalance. The traditional preference for sons over daughters has resulted in a national sex ratio of 933 females to 1000 males. There are more than five million missing girls and more than 35 million missing women. Female foeticide, dowry deaths, abduction and sale into a life of forced prostitution at home or abroad are all possible explanations for these ever growing numbers of missing Indian females. For every 100 boys enrolled in school, only 82 girls are in school. 54 percent of females are illiterate.

"Although the GMC has helped us strengthen our programs, sharpen our focus and mobilize other NGOs through initiatives like Meena, these campaigns usually last for just a day and then fade away," says Raaj Mangal Prasad, President of the New Delhi-based Association for Development, an NGO that runs two projects for child and female victims of violent crime.

Prasad says that what NGOs really need is help to lobby for a law against child rape. Someone, says Prasad, also needs to train judges who do not realize that in court, a child may not understand that he or she has been raped and may simply say he or she "got hurt" rather than that they were "forced to have sexual intercourse."

These issues are particularly sensitive for girls, who face stigma if they engage in any sexual activity before marriage. "We also need help pressuring the police department to train their officers about street children and child trafficking," says Prasad. "UNICEF can help on this front because when they get involved, government authorities pay more attention. But we need more than just girl-child days or weeks from UNICEF."

UNICEF officials say that transforming an entrenched system of gender discrimination is simply not going to happen overnight, and that changing attitudes is the first step. Meena is helping to do just that.

"We don't have the resources to support each and every grassroots NGO," says Savita Naqvi-Varde, UNICEF Communications Chief for India. "So what we can do is give NGOs tools like Meena to galvanize their support base and draw people into their movement."

