**I got hired at a Bangladesh sweatshop. Meet my 9-year-old boss**

Meem, 9, works 12-hour shifts at a factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. She dreams of becoming a sewing operator, buying more hair clips and helping her family. Raveena Aulakh works undercover in a Bangladesh garment factory for a first hand look at their working conditions.

**By:** **[Raveena Aulakh](http://www.thestar.com/authors.aulakh_raveena.html)** Environment, Published on Fri Oct 11 2013

**Introduction**

DHAKA, BANGLADESH—Some days are good for Meem, others she likes to forget as quickly as possible.

The first time I saw Meem, which was also my first day at work at a sweatshop, she was having a good day despite the wretched heat. She sat cross-legged on the concrete floor, a tiny, frail figure among piles of collars, cuffs and other parts of unstitched shirts.

She had a pair of cutters in her hands, much like eyebrow tweezers, and she was trimming threads from a navy collar. She cleared one collar after another of threads until the big pile, which had been bigger than her, was no more. It took her all morning and she didn’t look up much, did not join any conversation. When it was done, she took a few gulps of water from a scrunched bottle, walked around for a bit, her little hands rubbing her back, and went back to trimming threads — this time, from navy cuffs.

She did that from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., except for an hourlong lunch break.

Later, she said, it had been a good day: the electricity didn’t play hooky (which meant the three ceiling fans worked all day) and so it wasn’t oppressively hot, she had fish curry for lunch, and the floor manager didn’t yell at her for humming too loudly.

It was a very good day, she said again, dancing a little jig.

Meem is 9 years old and works as a sewing helper in a garment factory. For a few days this summer, she was also my boss.

She taught me the tricks of trimming. She taught me to smile when my back ached. She taught me some Bengali words.

*Sab bhalo*. It is all okay.

**Getting the job**

On a sweaty day this August, I arrived at a factory in a neighbourhood near Lalmatia in southwest Dhaka. The wide streets were lined with old buildings and were clogged with rickshaws, crowded buses and fancy cars. Clothes were hung out to dry from balconies, restaurants shared common front yards with abattoirs. At most street corners, there were shoe-shine men, tiny places that served tea and Bengali sweets.

Morningtime was almost always more chaotic as schoolchildren in uniforms scrambled to get to class and grown-ups hurried to work.

Off a main street and at the end of a laneway was the sweatshop.

Hamid, formerly a sewing operator with a big garment factory in Narayanganj, is the owner. About three years ago, he took a loan and started his own business — a small factory that operates without a name — and today employs about 45 people.

I walked in the first morning just after 8, a bottle of water in hand, and introduced myself to Ali, the floor manager, as Rubina, the new sewing helper. He is a small, wiry man who, I later discovered, cooks and sleeps at the factory.

He nodded and told me to take a look around.

Getting the job hadn’t been easy. Before Rana Plaza collapsed in a Dhaka suburb on April 24 and 1,129 people lost their lives, reporters got into factories and chronicled the appalling safety conditions, child labour and subsistence salaries. Now big factories have security and careful screening. Outsiders, especially non-Bengali speakers, are looked at with deep suspicion.

Even though my appearance helped, it didn’t help that I don’t know Bengali and don’t look impoverished. Initially, I tried to get a job at a big factory with the help of some well-connected friends in Dhaka. But as a friend said, his factory owner friend simply asked him why he didn’t just give me — the down-on-her-luck relative — money.

In the end, a cabbie I had hired while on assignment in Dhaka last year came through. A friend of his friend owned a small factory making garments for local retailers and often taking orders from big factories when they faced deadline pressures.

The cabbie told Hamid that his wife’s cousin (me) was an Indian woman who had recently moved to Dhaka, knew a few words of Bengali and needed a new start.

Hamid was in a bind. Some of his workers hadn’t returned from their villages after Eid and he had a deadline to meet. So he said yes, he would try me out for a few days. If I did well, we would talk money, said Hamid.

The factory wasn’t big: about two dozen sewing machines lined the walls of the windowless room, about half the size of a basketball court. Two cutting machines sat in a corner. The sewing machines had little benches for the operators, and almost all had piles of colourful fabric by the side. Three ceiling fans, covered with layers of dirt, hummed quietly.

In one corner was Hamid’s office. It had glass windows and a glass door. Most fabric was kept there before it was cut. A phone sat on the desk with an old computer that was almost never used.

There were no fire extinguishers, no exit other than the main door.

(I later counted another 21 sewing machines on the second floor of the same building. A rickety staircase was the only way up. Workers on the main and second floor didn’t socialize much.)

The sole washroom was right at the end of the laneway, opposite the sweatshop. It was dimly lit, with puddles of dirty water, and the toilet was little more than a hole in the ground. It was used by every business on the floor; even for showering by those who live there, including Ali, whose clothes hung on a clothesline in the narrow hallway. Rats frequently visited.

At the factory, the sewing helpers, seven of us, always sat in the middle of the floor, trimming threads, ironing, folding and later packaging.

That first day, in the centre of the floor, sat Meem.

Her father, who worked at another garment factory, had an early shift and so he had dropped Meem off. Even though work didn’t start until 9, she was already trimming threads. Ali gestured for me to sit on the floor and in rapid Bengali told Meem to give me work.

As soon as his back turned, Meem, who was nibbling on a samosa, told me to take it easy.

“It is your first day . . . just watch for a couple of hours,” she said shyly.

She was easy to love.

No one at the factory, including Meem, knew I was a reporter. Except for a few questions about her family, I never interviewed her: everything in the story is what I saw, what I heard.

I watched her and I watched Ali and began to understand how the factory worked.

Ali preferred to cut fabric into shirt pieces himself and did so every morning before the workers arrived. He then distributed the pieces, along with matching thread, to sewing operators. Some stitched shirt arms, others collars, cuffs and pockets.

The week I was there, the sweatshop had an order for men’s linen shirts. No one knew how many exactly or where the shirts were heading.

The way each shirt was sewn, at least in that factory, was astounding for the number of steps each takes, the details and the tasks, the repetition and the relentlessness. Like most people, I had never thought of it before.

The fabric for the shirt body was cut into three panels — the back, left side front and right side front. The sleeves, cuffs, pockets, pocket flaps and collars were cut separately. One woman would feed fabric into a machine and hundreds of collars would come out strung together by thread. A helper would then separate them and trim any dangling threads.

One sewing operator focused on finishing cuffs; another stitched together collars; another sewed cuffs or collars to the shirt panels. Pocket flaps and pockets were sewn separately and then attached.

That is how every part of the shirt was made — sewn on its own and then stitched together.

Every part of the shirt went separately through the helpers who trimmed the threads. Once assembled, the shirt returned to the floor so any threads could be trimmed before it was ironed and packaged.

I thought trimming sounded easy and it was, except I hadn’t counted on the hours spent sitting on the concrete floor without a backrest and the cutter digging into my thumb and forefinger.

It was back-breaking, it was finger-numbing. It was particularly rage-inducing. Not because it was painfully hard work but because children like Meem hunched over hour after hour, squinted at the threads, cleaned one collar after another, one cuff after another, one arm piece after another until the piles were depleted.

Then other piles arrived — some larger than the previous ones but almost always larger than Meem.

Nipping a hole while trimming was a terrible sin. It happened a couple of times a day.

Ali, who stood by the entrance watching, eventually noticed it and screamed at everyone until whoever was responsible owned up and then a sewing operator would try to salvage the piece, grumbling loudly.

There was a lot of yelling, mostly by Ali. It wasn’t clear how many shirts workers were expected to sew in an hour or a day but it was expected that they stay hunched over their sewing machines every minute they were at the factory. Snack breaks had to be quick, bathroom breaks even quicker.

Meem, the youngest, was often yelled at because she chatted too much and twice because she was humming a Bengali song too loudly.

Meem and the sewing helpers were paid the least, earning about $26 Canadian a month if they worked from 9 to 5 every day or about $32 if they worked overtime and stayed until 9 p.m. Most did. There were no weekends, except for a half-day every Friday, no sick leave, no holidays.

If a worker took a day off, it came off the paycheque.

Still, in a country where so many live in grinding poverty, Meem’s was a prized job, even though the minimum wage at this factory was between $30 and $38 a month**.**

“When I become a sewing operator, I will make very good shirts,” Meem promised. “No one will yell at me.”

That’s how big she dreamed: to graduate to a sewing operator one day.

**School’s out**

How Meem left school and started working at the factory is a fairly common story among poor Bangladeshi families: too many mouths to feed, too few bringing in money.

A few months ago, Meem’s mother, who worked as a domestic helper in Dhanmondi, an affluent Dhaka neighbourhood, found out she was pregnant and unable to work. Around the same time, Meem’s brother, a 15-year-old construction worker, argued with his parents about how much money he should contribute to the household. He left to live on his own.

With Meem, her three little sisters and a baby on the way, Meem’s father took her to Hamid and asked if she could work there.

Hamid said yes and just like that, school was out, 12-hour work shifts were in.

It is not as if Meem’s parents don’t care for her — they simply had no choice. Meem said her father did not want her to work at just any factory but chose Hamid’s because her aunt works as a sewing operator and would keep an eye out for her.

Meem’s wages go directly to her father. She is allowed to buy hair clips — she loves glitter — once a month, and an occasional ice cream.

“I have 11 hair clips,” she said one day, holding up both her hands and spreading her fingers. “So many.”

Meem’s friend at the sweatshop was Taaniya, a 13-year-old with long, dark hair and a shy smile. The older girl, always wearing the traditional *salwar kameez*, a long shirt with pants and a long scarf, taught Meem little tricks: for instance, how to hold the cutter close to the edge to get the best results but not nip the cloth. Or how to fold a shirt and *then* iron it, saving time.

Taaniya, who has been working for a few years, also told Meem which sewing operators complain the most and should be avoided.

Lootfah, 15, a pretty, fair-skinned operator, was their favourite. She was kind, happy and didn’t tell Ali if threads still dangled. She would quietly trim them.

Moni, in her late 20s, was a mother of three, often late for work and one of the first to leave. She would complain to Ali if the girls chatted too much or too loudly. Meem and Taaniya stayed away from her. If Moni asked for thread, they would go to the storage closet and give it to her in silence.

They got along with other sewing helpers, even Sheema and Sheekha, two girls in their early teens who had joined a few weeks before I had and were too terrified to ever talk.

“We try to be nice to everyone,” said Meem.

She was more than that.

If Meem noticed someone was trimming slowly, she would quickly do her share and then help out. When she returned from lunch, she would always bring back something for Taaniya, even if it was a bruised apple. When Sheekha admired her hair clips, Meem took them from her hair and pressed them into her hands.

Once she saw Lootfah burst into tears while talking on her cellphone and she slipped out and bought a shiny hair clip for her.

Meem was particularly good to me.

She told me to give her everything I trimmed and not put it in the done pile. I didn’t understand until it dawned on me that I wasn’t any good at my job. I was clumsy and I nipped at least twice. She “checked” so that I didn’t get into any trouble with Ali. She knew I was on trial at the sweatshop and if I didn’t trim the threads well, I would not last long.

I wasn’t as good to her. On my third day at work, I was sitting next to her during lunch, watching her quietly when she pulled my hair back from one side, pointed to my little gold hoop earrings and said they were pretty. I didn’t know what to do, I wish I had just given them to her.

Meem never complained but you could tell when all wasn’t well in Meem’s world: she would still smile — always — but not chat too much and sometimes, she would rub her back or massage the tips of her little fingers.

**‘The kids don’t know better’**

Factory managers prefer younger sewing helpers.

Their eyesight is better, their little fingers nimbly trim threads and they don’t fuss about backaches and neck pain.

“It works for everyone,” says Smitha Zaheed, who volunteers with the Dhaka-based Independent Garment Workers’ Union Federation.

“Factory owners get workers who are not demanding . . . while the parents get to keep what the kids earn because the kids don’t know any better,” she says.

But even at 9 years old, Meem knows money helps buy things and improve the quality of life. She knows it’s a tough world. Is she tough enough?

“I want to work in a bigger factory one day … there is more money,” she said one morning. But she is also intimidated by the idea. “But what if I get lost there? I have heard there are hundreds of operators. And I will never be able to know their names. Maybe I should stay here always. This is so close to home.”

Meem and Taaniya don’t think it is wrong that they are not in school. Everyone they know works in the garment factory industry or as domestic help.

The two girls would share what they had learned over lunch of curries or lentil soup and rice. Taaniya, ever the wise older girl, spoke of things her family could now afford: a new bed, a new goat and many more *salwar kameezes.*

Taaniya told Meem that if she earned enough, she wouldn’t have to get married and move away to live with some strange man who might like her, or might not.

She could also buy a colour TV set one day, Taaniya said.

Taaniya is the third of four siblings and she regularly buys gifts for her oldest sister’s daughter.

Cheap fashion has fuelled a social revolution in Bangladesh. It has given women more economic freedom, and to an extent, the power to make some decisions. By all accounts, working women are changing their lives, their families’ lives. There is more food in homes, and cleaner clothes. There is electricity, even if it’s one bulb, and there are toilets.

But it has come at a price.

Meem liked playing in the rain. She liked sleeping in on Sundays and holidays. She liked playing with her three baby sisters.

The factory has become her life, the life she will likely know for a long time, maybe all her days.

**Quiet acceptance**

At the end of my first day of work, I returned to my Dhaka hotel a little after 6 because I didn’t stay back for overtime. My back hurt, I had a nosebleed from sitting in the wicked heat, and my head ached. I was hungry but couldn’t eat. I smoked half a pack of cigarettes and watched the minutes tick by until 9 o’clock and I knew Meem would have finally left for home.

My backache was worse the second day. So was the despair.

The third day, I didn’t want to go back. I didn’t want to see Meem. I didn’t want to see her ever again.

It was mostly because Meem did not look unhappy. She was okay with working 12 hours every day, she didn’t see anything wrong with sitting on the floor, she quietly accepted the backache.

I could only think of another 9-year-old girl: Arshiya.

Arshiya, like Meem, is bony with short cropped hair, an elfin smile. They are both smart and clever. They are witty and fun to be around. They are partial to hugs.

Arshiya is my best friend’s daughter, lives in an affluent neighbourhood in South Delhi, attends a private school, is fluent in two languages and learning German, is good at taekwondo and plays piano.

Last year, she wanted to be a jumbo aircraft pilot; this year a NASA scientist.

I remember nuzzling her head under my chin and teasing her: “As long as you don’t flunk math.”

A week later, I met Meem.

The little girl who did not attend school anymore, never had any time to play and dreamed of being a sewing operator one day.

As Meem would say: *Sab bhalo*, it is all okay.

It isn’t.