

Ariam's Story

Ariam is nine years old. She works 7 days a week for 12 hours a day. She wakes up at 5:00 A.M., rises from her mat on the dirt floor, feeds and dresses her little brother and sister, and eats a tiny bowl of cold rice. She rides the bike that her father fixed up for her and arrives at the factory by 6:00 A.M. every morning. Before she and the 1,200 other workers go inside, they are physically searched for candy or food, which is prohibited. For the next 12 hours, none of the workers are allowed to take breaks or have a drink of water. Workers must raise their hands to use the bathrooms, which are kept locked, and bathroom visits are limited to two per day. The factory is dirty and unsafe. Last week, the girl on the production line next to Ariam was killed when her rusted machine stuck and pulled her into the gears. More and more girls have been coming to work because many families are losing their small farms since they can't compete with the cheap, subsidized food rich countries over-produce and then dump in their markets.

Ariam dreams about going to school, but only her older brother, Adio, has ever been allowed to go. Her father said that if she attended, it would be a waste of a desk. Besides, the family needs the money she brings home. Her older brother used to go to school, but last year he started working all day to earn money for his family. He learned to read a few words before he dropped out. Her father can't work because he is always sick. Last week, he got malaria. The clinic is giving mosquito nets only to the children in her town. No net is available for her father, even though he is HIV positive and gets sick very easily. Now, he is in bad shape, and Ariam is worried that she will come home one day and find him dead. Ariam's mother died two years ago giving birth to her baby brother, Juma. The women in the village tried to help her mother, but she needed a doctor. The nearest clinic was three villages away, and no one had money to make the trip. Ariam knows a few other families in her tiny village who lost their mothers the same way. It is sad but not unusual. She also worries about her little sister, Nailah, who is three years old. She always has been sickly, but she now won't eat what little food they give her. Since Ariam has to work long hours every day, she cannot take Nailah to the clinic to get the shots that a nice foreign lady is always telling them Nailah needs. And the shots would cost them money that they don't have. Vaccinations are only free a few times a year, when aid workers come through her part of the country. Juma is a happy little boy. Ariam's father was so pleased when he was born, even though his wife died during his birth. Ariam's mother had given birth to a boy four years ago, but he died three days after he was born. Ariam's mother was so upset that she held the little boy's body for a whole day before she let her uncles take him away. Ariam's father was even more crushed, and he kept saying that he needed more sons. Boys have better earning prospects. Ariam also had an older sister, Malaika, but she died in the tsunami while she was out trying to catch fish for the family's dinner. They found her body four weeks later. Only her mother recognized her.

Ariam makes 50¢ per day. Her brother earns \$1 a day. The entire family lives on \$1.50 a day. It is not enough. Ariam sometimes steals fruit from neighbors' trees on her way home from work. Two months ago, her brother stole a chicken from another village. While they ate well that night, the next day the owner of the chicken beat her brother terribly, and now he walks with a limp. Normally, the family eats a hand-

ful of moldy lentils or grain that they manage to buy with their small amount of money. They once grew vegetables in their small garden, but recent droughts have made that too difficult. Most days, her father waves away any food she puts in front of him and says to give it to the little ones. Each family member eats only about 300–600 calories a day which is about what you would find in a small bowl of plain rice. The big white NGO truck comes and delivers food in the village, without which none of them would have survived this long. But it is still not enough for all five of them. Her father and little sister are dying. She does not know what to do.

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