

Lien's story:

A profile from Young Lives in Vietnam



Lien grew up in an economic development zone just outside Hanoi. Her parents worked long hours and she often had to help with her two younger siblings. As she grew up she also did paid work, sewing shopping bags for an international furniture store in order to supplement the family income. In Grade 2, Lien discovered that her father had had many affairs and eventually he left her mother for his mistress, which has been a great source of sorrow for Lien. But she persevered in school, and has now managed to get into university...

There have been many changes in Lien's life in the past three years. She has left home to study at university in Hanoi, her sister has got married, and her grandfather has died, which made her very sad. Her father is still living with his mistress.

"My dad is still the same. He has still left my family."

Do you know anything about your dad's other family?
I am not sure.

Are you not going to ask him?
No. I am not going to.

Does your brother-in-law know that your dad has another family?
I don't know if he does. But I think so. I thought he would change when he had a son-in-law but he hasn't."

Lien's mother tells her to tolerate the situation:

"Just take it easy, and don't think too much. Just let him be. He is just like that. I always have to be gentle with him. If I am tense, [he] will get tense too, maybe ask for a divorce, and [then] where would I live? It is important to save face so his family, the neighbours, and my own brothers and sisters think there is no problem between me and my husband. I never say anything negative to my own family, to keep the image that he is still a good husband ..."

She adds that she always encouraged their father to be close to his children. "[My children] still care for their father. They don't stay away from him like other children might [in the same situation]."

Lien says she was really happy when she got into university. Her mother said:

"Everyone loved us They said: 'That family - all the children go to college.' Before my daughter left for university, I bought sweets and invited the neighbours for tea, and the whole village came. Some people gave a few hundreds, some 20-30,000 dong."

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Even now that she is in university, Lien comes home most weekends because it isn't far. She is studying Social Work at the University of Labour and Social Affairs. The course will take four years and she is in her first year. She has to pay full tuition fees and achieve 132 credits at a cost of 173,000 dong per credit (about 8 US dollars). She also has to pay for health insurance, which is more than 200,000 dong a year.

She says that classes are really crowded: "In some subjects, there are 60 people. But most of my classes are over 100." This means that the teachers don't know any of the students individually. Of the 50 people in her immediate class, only four are boys. The work is hard: the students start at 6 or 6.30am and work until 5.30pm.

She sleeps in a dormitory with 11 other girls. She heard about it from her cousin's cousin. They each have a padlocked locker.

They have to go out to eat unless they have something like instant noodles, which she often has for breakfast. She says they all get on well but there is sometimes competition for the bathroom. They don't have hot water so have to boil water when they need it.

"Do you have a room captain?
Yes.

Who is it?

It's me! They said that the person who was here first would be room captain. I got here first so they voted for me. Since I was doing my job pretty well, they voted for me again. I have to schedule the chores timetable, tell people to keep things clean and organise and pay the electricity bill."

Academically, however, Lien is worried that she is not doing well: "I do Ho Chi Minh's ideology, Marxism, general Law, family studies, introduction to social work, gymnastics and running, and social policy. Mostly everything is bad."

"How do they grade this?
Coursework and regular attendance count for 40 per cent. The final exam is 60 per cent. Last semester, I only got one C and the rest were Ds.

How come?
If I am five minutes late, they won't let me in, which counts as an absence.

Then why don't you try to get to class earlier?
Sometimes I get there on time. Since I live close by, I have become lazy."

She had considered studying accountancy, but was advised by a teacher that if she studied social work there would be a lot of job opportunities when she finished:

"He said it was a hard subject to take but it was interesting. He said something else, which was really appealing: I could take care of older people or children, work in a ward or in a company that needs social workers. He said that many white-collar workers have left their parents at home. They could hire me to take care of their parents."

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Her mother is concerned that they don't know anyone working in this field so it might be difficult for Lien to find a job. She cites the experience of Lien's sister, who went to university and then couldn't find work, until finally:

"There was someone we know who was teaching at a high school who said that she knew someone. [They] said, with 150 million dong [about 7,000 dollars], she could get a permanent contract. First we needed to make a down-payment of 80 million dong. We put down that payment, and she was about to start, and then [they] said we needed put down another 70 million dong, and then it turned out it was not sure when she would get the permanent contract ... so [we] stopped. If we had to borrow that much we would die. They were playing tricks.

So who helped her get the job?

Before she graduated, a cousin who worked at an export company told her to apply. So they asked a lady working in the kitchen who knows a lot of people. Then in June two years ago, they called her.

How much did it cost?

It did not cost much. Just a few million, and gifts. So she got the job. Otherwise it would be very problematic, as there is nothing to do at home."

Her mother says of Lien:

"She is a good girl, and she is hard-working. She knows that I am working, so she takes care of the housework, or if her siblings need anything, she helps take care of them. I just want her to graduate, find a job and marry.

The most important thing is to get married?

The most important thing is to get a job ... parents want their children to have stable jobs, good husbands, that's it. If they are doing well, sometimes they might give us small things. For example, they might say: 'Today I got my salary, I will give you some new clothes.' That would make [me] happy. No need for any big dreams. Just dream that in my old age [the children] will bring their children home and I will look after them. That's happiness."

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Youth employment

Vietnam has seen many years of economic growth and a reduction in poverty. It is now focused on sustaining this growth and competing as an industrialising middle-income country.

It is interesting to see that Lien decided to study social work because she felt it would offer her good job opportunities, but that she is also thinking about accountancy. She is among the 50 per cent of Young Lives older children in Vietnam who are still in education at the age of 19, and among the 19 per cent who are at university. Most, like Lien, are studying full time, but 16 per cent are doing paid work at the same time.

More young women are still in education (53 per cent) than young men (43 per cent), and young people from wealthier households are much more likely to be in education (62 per cent) than those from poorer families (27 per cent).

The likelihood of continuing in education is closely related to household wealth, with 62 per cent of young people from better-off households still enrolled compared with just 27 per cent from the poorest households. Of those who have left school, over two-thirds did so without completing upper secondary school. A third, mostly from the poorest families, are now in full-time paid work – 45 per cent of young men compared with just a quarter of young women.

Sources: Nguyen Thang and Le Thuc Duc (2014) *Youth and Development: Preliminary Findings from the 2013 Young Lives Survey in Vietnam.*

Country Context: Vietnam

Over the last 30 years, Vietnam has been transformed from one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income of around US\$100, into a lower-middle-income country with per capita income of over US\$2,000 by the end of 2014. Its per capita GDP growth since 1990 has been among the fastest in the world.

The country has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty; the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped from over 50 per cent in the early 1990s to 3 per cent today. However, there are still serious inequalities between the ethnic majority and ethnic minority groups with the latter accounting for 15 per cent of the population but more than half of the poorest sector of society.*

The people of Vietnam are better educated and have a higher life expectancy than those in most countries with a similar per capita income. The maternal mortality ratio has dropped below the upper-middle-income country average, while the under-5 mortality rate has fallen by half. Access to basic services and infrastructure has also improved considerably; while in 1993 less than half the population had electricity, it is now available to almost all households. Access to clean water and modern sanitation has risen from less than 50 per cent of all households to more than 75 per cent.

As Vietnam moves from being an agrarian society to a developed economy, this new stage of development will require government investment in a skilled labour force, improved infrastructure and new technologies.

*<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview>

Towards A Better Future? Hopes and Fears from Young Lives

Young Lives is a unique international study which has been following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over the course of the Millennium Development Goals. As the world now moves on to the Sustainable Development Goals, attention has been drawn to the need for evidence and robust data to monitor progress at national level. The kind of data that Young Lives collects is rare in developing countries and so can be very useful for governments and international donors. The data build a story – and, more importantly, build evidence for change.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from our interviews with the children and young people. Each one is accompanied by the short description of a 'theme' that emerged from their interviews and which illustrates the issues that children and young people are having to contend with. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor communities, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and families who are participating in the Young Lives study willingly share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality and ensure their identities remain protected. For this reason, the children's names have been changed here. The accompanying photos are of children to the children within our study.



Acknowledgements and credits

This is an extract from our updated book of 24 profiles following the same children since 2007. *Building a Better Future: Hopes and Fears from Young Lives*, by Nikki van der Gaag and Caroline Knowles, available to download from our website: www.younglives.org.uk/content/publications.

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