

H'Mai's story

A profile from Young Lives in Vietnam



H'Mai is 13 years old and is the second oldest of four children. Her family is from the H'Roi ethnic minority. They live in a rural area where there are high levels of poverty. H'Mai dropped out of school in Grade 6 because her parents didn't have enough money to pay the fees. Many children in the community drop out of secondary school because their families can't afford the fees and other expenses, or because they live too far away from the school and don't have any transport, or because they have to work in the fields and so fall behind in their school work.

H'Mai's family lives in a small house with two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. There is another traditional building behind the house, with a kitchen and a bedroom where the family spends most of their time. There is a well in front of their house, which is surrounded by large empty gardens and faces a road full of potholes.

The house doesn't have a table or chairs, so H'Mai's mother had to take the Young Lives researchers to a relative's house for the interview. There is no electricity in the house. Although there is a supply in the village, the family can't afford the connection. H'Mai says she dreams of having electricity at home one day.

H'Mai dropped out of school in Grade 6 because her parents didn't have enough money to pay the school fees. While primary education is free, there are a number of additional fees. H'Mai's mother says this embarrassed her. Many children in the community drop out of secondary school because their families are too poor to pay the school fees and other expenses, or because they live too far away from the school and don't have any form of transport, or because they have to work in the fields so fall behind in their school work.

The local primary school is not good and has poor facilities. First to third grade children study together and there is not even a tree in the school playground to provide shade. The secondary school is six kilometres away. When H'Mai went there she used to start at 6am. Now she works on the family farm in the day and goes to night school in the evenings from 7pm to 9pm on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. She is in the ninth grade.

When she is not working or studying, H'Mai looks after her younger siblings including her youngest brother who is still a baby. She does the laundry and cooks. She also spends time with her cousin who lives next door. Her mother says: "Sometimes she goes out with her friends to herd cows or helps me do the housework."



“Apart from herding cows, does she work in the fields?”

She helps cut grass for the cows. She can't do hard manual labour in the fields.

Does your family have a lot of land?

About one hectare.

What crops do you grow?

We grow rice.

Anything else?

Beans, cassava and wheat.

Do you ask her to do the household chores or does she volunteer?

She volunteers. I also help her out. For example, I just helped her herd the cows.

Is she happy to do so?

Yes.”

The family are generally healthy, which is a good thing as the nearest health clinic is five kilometres away and the hospital is nine kilometres away. The road to the clinic and the hospital isn't very good, meaning that taking people for treatment can be difficult. Children under 6 get free treatment at the clinic and H'Mai's mother says that she takes her younger children there regularly for check-ups. She says there are private doctors in the area but not many people she knows use them. She also sometimes uses traditional medicines and doctors:

“When one of my children was seriously ill, people advised me to perform a ritual. I would have taken them to the clinic otherwise.

Do you perform the rituals by yourself, or do you ask a traditional healer doctor to do it for you?

We ask a traditional healer.

How many traditional healers are there in the village?

There are two.

How much do you have to pay them for each ritual?

We don't pay anything.

Do you have to give them anything?

We give them chicken or pork.”



Her mother says H'Mai has a good relationship with her parents and family. She talks to them about her problems, for example: "When she was sick, she asked us to buy some medicine for her. When her hat didn't shield her from the sun anymore, she asked us to buy her a new one. If she wants to go somewhere, she will ask our permission."

The Young Lives researchers asked H'Mai's mother what conditions needed to be in place for a child to be happy. She said: "If a family has good conditions, their children are happy; and if a family is poor, their children are unhappy."

"What is an unhappy child like?"

He or she looks sad and worried.

Are you satisfied with your family's conditions?"

No, no."

*H'Mai talks to her parents about her problems, for example:
"When she was sick, she asked us to buy some medicine for her. When her hat didn't shield her from the sun anymore, she asked us to buy her a new one. If she wants to go somewhere, she will ask our permission."*

H'Mai's mother



Country context: Vietnam

The population of Vietnam in 2007 was an estimated 85 million, divided almost equally between men and women. The population is about 75 per cent rural. However, this picture is changing, as rates of migration towards the cities are high. Rural areas have substantially higher rates of poverty and poorer access to services than urban areas.

- Vietnam ranks 105 out of 177 countries in the 2007/8 United Nations Human Development Report.
- Economic growth averaged 7.5% between 1990 and 2004 and poverty fell rapidly.
- More than half the population is under the age of 25.
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97%.
- Ethnic minorities account for 39.3% of all poor people, despite representing only 12.6% of the total population.

Vietnam is a low-income country, but the conditions for children have been improving and are generally much better than when their parents young. After a period of slow growth with rampant inflation in the mid-1980s, the Government launched the Doi Moi or 'renovation' programme of comprehensive socio-economic reforms in 1986. The reforms emphasised a shift from a centrally-planned economy based on government ownership to a multi-sector economy based on market principles. They also promoted the opening up of the economy to foreign investment and trade.

In addition to policies aimed at promoting economic growth and trade, the Government of Vietnam has applied a number of targeted programmes addressing poverty and social deprivation. The country has also benefited from significant foreign aid inflows, many of which have been targeted at poverty reduction. Despite this impressive progress, however, gaps in poverty rates by rural-urban residence, by region and by ethnic groups have widened over time.

Sources: Young Lives Round 2 Survey Report: Vietnam; 2007/8 UN Human Development Report.

Ethnic minority groups in Vietnam

Inequalities between ethnic groups in Vietnam are stark. Poverty is increasingly concentrated among ethnic minority groups. While between 1993 and 2004 the poverty rate of ethnic minorities fell by 25% (from 86% to 61%), the reduction for the majority Kinh group was 40% (from 54% to 14%). Even after this reduction the ethnic minorities still hadn't reached the level that the ethnic majority had in 1993.

Ethnic minorities account for 39.3% of all poor people, despite representing only 12.6% of the total population. The biggest ethnic group in the Young Lives sample is the H'Mong whose average monthly expenditure was one third of the average across the sample.

Economic disparities are echoed by those in other poverty indicators. Ethnic minority children are more likely to be stunted (which is an indicator of long-term malnutrition) and less likely to enrol in school and pre-school, even after controlling for lower parental education, consumption expenditure and other household characteristics. Consumption expenditure of Kinh households is more than double that of the ethnic minority group. Minority households have poor access to safe water and in particular to sanitation.

Childhood poverty statistics reflect patterns in the country as a whole. Most poor children are in the rural areas: 32.6% of rural children lived in households classified as poor in 2004, in contrast to only 5.5% of urban children. Ethnic minority children are disproportionately likely to live in poor rural households. In the mid-1990s, over 90%, or nearly every ethnic minority child, lived in a poor household. Even after Vietnam's impressive overall progress over the past decade, 68% of ethnic minority children remained in poverty in 2004. Despite generally rapid development, the inequality between rural and urban sectors and between ethnic groups remains an issue of concern.

Source: Le Thuc Duc et al. (2008) *Young Lives: Vietnam Round 2 Survey Report. Initial Findings.*

Young Lives is a unique long-term research project investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty. By following a group of children over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty, and provide evidence to support the development of effective policies. We are working with 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. The story here is one of a set of twenty taken from the interviews our researchers did with the children individually and in groups. Each child's story has a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that the children are having to contend with, but also gives a wider picture in relation to children's lives. This ranges from child work and education, to migration, health, domestic violence, inequality, gender, and individual circumstances such as being an orphan or being disabled.

The children and their families who are participating in Young Lives willing share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality. For this reason, the children's names have been changed. The accompanying photos are of children living in similar communities in similar circumstances to the Young Lives children. Photo credit: © Young Lives / Pham Viet Anh.

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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty