

Louam's story

A profile from Young Lives in Ethiopia



Louam is 6 years old. She is an active child who smiles a lot. She is the youngest of seven children. Her parents farm and breed cattle and are relatively well off. There was a time when even they had to live on bread and tea because bad weather destroyed their crops. Now she is waiting eagerly until she is 7 and can go to school.

Louam's family lives in a district of Amhara State in the north-west of Ethiopia. A mid-sized road leads to their house which is large and has a corrugated iron roof and a window which lets in light, although there is no electricity. There is a bedroom, a living room, a store room and a kitchen in the back yard. The walls of the main room are painted and covered with colourful magazines and traditional art known as *safet*, made of dried grasses. There are three wooden chairs and a table covered with animal skin where Louam studies. The family's two donkeys live in a room attached to the house.

Louam is not officially due to go to school until next year but she says that many of her friends were going this year so she went too, together with her older siblings. However, the school administration refused to officially register her, saying that she was under-age. She needed to be 7 to be formally registered in school. She was sad about this. She said:

"I am left behind when all of my friends go ... The school has turned me out of the class many times just because I am not a formal member of the class... The monitor in the class beats me when I talk with my friends; I have been beaten twice so far. He beat me with a stick and kicked me out of the class, and the teacher supported the monitor's decision."

However, she is still keen to go to school, where she hopes to learn to read and write and study Amharic, her own language, and English. Her mother, who attends adult literacy classes, also wants her youngest daughter to be educated.

In the interview, Louam was clear about her likes and dislikes when it came to food. She expressed concern about physical violence both at home and in school. She says she prefers her father because her mother hits her when she fights with her older brother. She also talked a lot about how teachers hit children in school and how she doesn't like this. The interviewer asked her what advice she would give to friends who want to start going to school. She described what they would learn – drawing, Amharic, English – and then said that she would tell her friends "not to talk in class while the monitor is present." She then describes a student who was talking in class. The teacher hit her on the head and she sat on the floor "because she couldn't keep silent."





Asked about helping her mother in the house, she said:

“What about working?”

Sometimes, I like fetching water.

Why do you like it?

But, I don't do it alone.

Why?

Because I am afraid.

What are you afraid of?

I am afraid of the sun in the afternoon.

What else?

Wild animals.

What kind of wild animal?

A jumping animal. One was found at the gate.”

Louam's mother thinks she is around 32 years old. She says Louam is a healthy child, although she has had eczema. She is due to go to hospital again but they are waiting until the potatoes are harvested so that they can afford to pay the fees.

There was a period when Louam was little when the family did not have enough to eat because bad weather – wind and snow – led to decreased agricultural production. For a time the whole family, including Louam, lived on tea and bread. They earned food by planting eucalyptus trees. Louam's mother says: “She lost weight and became thin but now she improves, with the help of God. She eats a variety of food and a balanced diet.” However, Louam's mother is worried that this year there will be a similar problem; the harvest will be poor and they will have to sell their possessions to buy food from the market.

Louam's mother thinks her daughter now has enough to eat, and she wears better clothes and shoes than many other children. “She also changes her clothes everyday. If she wears trousers today she will wear a skirt tomorrow.”

Louam is due to go to hospital but the family are waiting until the potatoes are harvested so they can pay the fees.



The interviewer asked her if she has any concerns about her daughter:

"I am concerned that when she joins school she might be beaten by other children and might have an accident on the road."

What do you advise her about car accidents?

I advise her to take care while she walks at the side of the road. I tell her that a car can kill her. So I tell her to walk at the side of the road when a car passes in the middle. If the car passes on the right side you must walk on the left. But she tells me not to worry and that attending school will help her to learn how to solve these problems.

What do you advise her about how not to quarrel with other children?

I tell her not to fight with them, not to do bad things but to do good things for them. I also advise her not to say anything to them in order to not to be beaten.

What would you like your daughter to be in the future?

I want her to become a government worker. This will help her and she will be able to support me."

"She lost weight and became thin but now she improves, with the help of God. She eats a variety of food and a balanced diet."

Louam's mother

Pre-school education in Ethiopia

Since kindergartens are rarely available in rural areas, virtually all the households that reported enrolling their children in pre-school in the Young Lives cohort are from urban areas. About 58% of the 5-year-old children in urban areas have been enrolled in pre-school compared with less than 4% in rural areas.

As one study notes: 'The main options for the vast majority of young children in rural areas are: (i) waiting until they reach the normal age (7 years old) to be admitted into formal primary school without any previous schooling experience; (ii) attending a religious school from an early age which may not be suitable for everyone – especially for girls; or (iii) being sent (informally) to school with their older siblings and making the most of the experience by learning something about school discipline, alphabets and numbers', like Louam, which as we have seen, has its own problems. The study notes that according to a primary school teacher in Louam's district:

The government has not given emphasis to pre-school education in the rural areas. Though the expectation of the government was that private and non-governmental organisations would be involved in the expansion of kindergarten both in the urban and rural areas, this has not worked in the rural areas.

In urban areas, an analysis of the factors that influence pre-school enrolment shows that education levels of both mothers and fathers make a big difference to pre-school enrolment. Children with long-term health problems are also more likely to be enrolled (perhaps because the parents feel this extra support will be helpful to their child). Young Lives did not find any significant differences between boys and girls.

Sources: Tassew Woldehanna et al. (2008) *Young Lives: Ethiopia Round 2 Survey Report*.

Martin Woodhead, Patricia Ames, Uma Vennam, Workneh Abebe and Natalia Streuli (2009, forthcoming) *Access, Equity and Quality in Early Education and Transitions to Primary School: Evidence from Young Lives Research in Ethiopia, India and Peru*, Bernard van Leer Foundation Working Paper.



Country context: Ethiopia

Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest countries, although progress has been made in recent years. Child mortality has fallen, access to health improved and advances have been made in primary education. The population of Ethiopia is 73.9 million.

Ethiopia ranks 169 out of 177 countries in the UN's Human Poverty Index.

- Life expectancy is only 51.8 years.
- 77.8% of all Ethiopians live on less than \$2 a day and 23% live on less than \$US1. There are large discrepancies between rural and urban people.
- Most of Ethiopia's children remain very poor and continue to live with 'not enough' in terms of household assets, food and goods, basic services and opportunities.
- One in every 13 children dies before reaching their first birthday, while one in every eight does not survive until they are 5 years old.
- Ethiopian children have high levels of malnutrition. Nearly one in two (47%) children under 5 are stunted (short for their age), 11% wasted (thin for their height), and 38% underweight.
- Literacy is low, at 31% for rural and 74% for urban residents.

Nutrition and malnutrition for younger children in Ethiopia

Poor harvests and food shortages over many years have affected the nutritional status of children around the country. According to the 2005 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, nearly one in two (47%) children under 5 are stunted (short for their age), 11% wasted (thin for their height) and 38% underweight. Thus it was not a surprise that Young Lives research also found high levels of both stunting (a measure of chronic malnutrition) and underweight among the Young Lives children. Within the younger cohort, which includes Louam, 31% were stunted and 8% of the children severely stunted.

On a more positive note, however, things improved between 2002 and 2007, when the two rounds of the Young Lives survey took place. Stunting decreasing from 35% to 31% and the proportion of underweight children from 33% to 24%. This impressive change in a short period can be attributed to improvements in household wealth and increased access to health services and sanitation, although we should also note that the percentage of children who were stunted or wasted was artificially high in Round 1 as this was a year of drought in many areas.

Young Lives analysis also showed that girls are less malnourished than boys (a finding that has been replicated in other studies in Ethiopia), while children in urban areas tend to be relatively better-off compared to rural children in terms of both level of and changes in malnutrition. Household wealth has a positive impact on children's nutrition, as does parental education.

Source: Tassew Woldehanna et al. (2008) *Young Lives: Ethiopia Round 2 Survey Report*.

Sources: Young Lives Round 2 Survey Report: Ethiopia; 2007/08 UN Human Development Report

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 / Aida Ashenafi.

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Young Lives 
An International Study of Childhood Poverty