



# H'Mai's story

A profile from  
Young Lives in Vietnam

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but my husband loves me a lot."*

H'Mai's mother

# H'Mai's story

H'Mai is now 16 years old. When we called at her house, her mother explained that we could not see her. The reason was a big surprise ...

H'Mai's mother told us her daughter was married and had just had a baby boy. She explained that it was the custom for the new mother not to leave the house, or have visitors, or keep new clothes in the house, or even to wash herself until the baby was a month old.

*"She can't eat raw food. She can eat meat, lean meat only, bitter melons, and string beans and cabbage.*

Is she allowed to shower or wash her hair?

*No. She can't shower or wash her hair for a month. After the confinement, I'll pick some leaves and make a pot for her to steam herself. Then she can shower as well. And according to tradition, we also can't buy any material for a pregnant woman. We could buy it and have it made into outfits but we can't leave it in the house. It's taboo.*

Is she allowed to go outside?

*No. She just stays in the house. She's not allowed to go out."*

Despite a number of attempts, the team did not succeed in meeting H'Mai. But they did talk in more detail with her mother and eventually to H'Mai's husband, although both were very busy and it took some time to arrange. And even then, the interview with H'Mai's mother was interrupted many times. Her husband needed money for petrol; her son asked her for some money to go out; her son-in-law asked her where the soap was ...

H'Mai's mother is clearly in charge of the family. She said she too was married at 16. She is responsible for herding four cows, taking care of H'Mai and her baby, preparing meals and washing clothes for the three younger children and doing all the housework. Every day, she wakes up at 4am and works hard until 7.30pm.

One of the things that the team discussed with H'Mai's mother was the cost of the wedding:

*"We had to borrow almost eight million dong (385 dollars) for the wedding. That was a lot of money.*

So you had to prepare feasts for the wedding?  
How many pigs did you kill?

*We bought them from my paternal grandmother for more than a million dong (48 dollars). We also bought around 20 kegs of beer. We also had to spend money on renting the wedding dress and other things, which cost more than a million dong.*

Last time we visited H'Mai she was 13, and she had dropped out of school because her family could not afford to pay the fees. H'Mai's family is from the H'Roi ethnic minority group. She is the second oldest of four children. They live in a rural area which is quite remote and where few people speak Vietnamese as their first language.

Did you have to borrow the money then? Who did you borrow from?

*I borrowed from Mr Tam, my uncle."*

H'Mai's husband, who is 20, was reluctant to talk at first, but perhaps it was because he didn't speak much Vietnamese as he had dropped out of school in 4th grade. He could not understand some of the things we said. When that happened, H'Mai's mother, who was cooking in the kitchen, would rush in to the rescue.

H'Mai's husband said he was the youngest of nine. He clearly got on well with H'Mai's siblings, the youngest of whom was jumping on and off his lap while he was being interviewed. H'Mai's mother came in from the kitchen to say how much he loved his new baby: "All he does when he comes home is to kiss and kiss and kiss the baby."

He talked in some detail about the wedding. In the morning, the groom's family came to pick up the bride at her house. H'Mai was wearing a blue wedding dress. The two bridesmaids and two groomsmen were all dressed up too. There was a small party at the bride's house. Then the bride changed into a red dress to go to his family's house where the ceremony was held. After the ceremony, a representative of the bride's family, and another for the groom's, clinked their glasses together. The two families also sounded two gongs, one from the groom's family and the other from the bride's. H'Mai's mother said it was believed that the young couple would live happily together forever if the two gongs coincided.

Shortly after the wedding, H'Mai became pregnant. Her mother said that she had had a difficult birth. She had had stomach cramps, and then:

*"We carried her to bed, and she was rolling, yelling, crying and pinching her aunt. Then she told her husband to take her to the medical centre, and told the doctor to do an examination ... When she was done giving birth, she stayed at the hospital for six days. Luckily she had insurance or it would have been very costly. As it was we had to pay for injections."*

But the baby was fine and weighed 3.4 kilogrammes. According to custom, they have not named him yet.

H'Mai's mother says that she hopes H'Mai and her husband will be as happy as she has been. "I think that if she could be happily married as I am... I may be lacking money, and food, but my husband loves me a lot."

She then talks about her husband's drinking... "When he drinks, no matter how drunk he gets, he'll never pick fights with me. I feel very good about that."

She is not sure if this is true of H'Mai's husband and says she is afraid: "I hope that H'Mai's husband will be like mine. As women, we are so miserable if our husbands don't behave. Once they're drunk, they start hitting and yelling. The husband even runs after the wife if she leaves carrying the baby..."

She says this has already happened with H'Mai and her husband. "I told her, 'If he doesn't drink a lot, then it's OK. He doesn't drink all day or all night. So what are you so worked up about? He just has one or two glasses with his friends...'"

She has some more advice for her daughter:

*“If there’s anything wrong, you should wait till you both get home then talk to each other. If you say it in front of others, they will say that you don’t allow your husband to hang out with friends. No matter how angry you are, wait till you and your husband are home then talk about it. You’re teaching each other. Don’t despise or show disrespect to your husband in front of friends.*”

So what do you expect H'Mai's life to be like in future?

*I just want her and her husband to love each other, and have a house, and children who go to school. That is all.”*

### Health insurance for poor families

The Vietnamese Government wants everyone in the country to have health insurance by 2015. It is already law for any employee to contribute to a health insurance scheme. Those who are working for themselves, and family members of those who are employed, can register voluntarily. The Government also has a targeted health insurance scheme for those who cannot afford the contributions. Under the law on health insurance, which came into effect in July 2009, children under 6 years old, ethnic minorities and poor people in rural areas are entitled to free health insurance, while students from low-income households pay less.

By 2010, it was recognised that families just above the income threshold for getting free insurance had not taken up the scheme. Although they pay only 20 per cent of the annual insurance fee, they have been reluctant to join. This may be partly because of cost, or because the process is complicated, or because lack of investment in clinic facilities and shortages of specific medicines also make the insurance seem less worthwhile.

The health insurance system has been helpful for many poor families. Some experts think the objective of universal health insurance unrealistic. But they are quite optimistic that by 2014 the Government could achieve universal basic health services, including maternal healthcare, free health services for children under 6, and access to clean water and sanitation.

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**Source:** Le Thuc Duc et al. (2012) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report.

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H'Mai's mother



## Country context: Vietnam

Over 88 million people from 54 different ethnic groups live in Vietnam. For most, living conditions have steadily improved since the 1990s. Vietnam is now considered a 'medium human development' country, and ranks 128 out of 187 in the United Nations Human Development Index. Average life expectancy is 75.

The Government has been gradually moving the country from being a centrally planned Communist state to a market-oriented economy. It has introduced a number of programmes to address poverty and social deprivation, and much foreign aid has also been targeted at poverty reduction.

The country was badly affected by the global recession in 2009. Food prices increased and exports went down. There are widening gaps between rich and poor, and between the majority ethnic Kinh and the country's many minority populations.

- The number of people living below the official poverty line continues to decline, from 16 per cent in 2006 to 11 per cent in 2010.
- This masks a big gap in poverty rates between majority and minority groups. In 2008, only 9 per cent of the ethnic majority population was poor, but almost half the ethnic minority population.
- Gender discrimination continues to undermine the well-being of women and children.

### Children

- About 2.6 million children are classified as being in need of special protection, including those with disabilities, orphans and those in poverty.
- The Government has made efforts to improve healthcare services for women and children, and Vietnam now ranks 90th in the world for under-5 mortality.
- Among under-5s, 5 per cent are underweight, 8 per cent are wasted (thin for their height) and 32 per cent stunted (short for their age).
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97 per cent. In Vietnam, boys are more likely to drop out of secondary school than girls.

**Sources:** [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk); UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report 2011*; Le Thuc Duc et al. (2011) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report; UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012*.

Young Lives is a unique international study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. By following the lives of 12,000 children and young people over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and provide evidence to support effective policies for children.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from the interviews we did with the children individually and in groups. Each one is accompanied by a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that children are having to contend with, but also gives a sense of the wider context of their lives. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, the effects of migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor people, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and their 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 in similar situations to the children within our study sample.

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