



# Manuel's story

A profile from  
Young Lives in Peru

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Manuel's mother

# Manuel's story

**Manuel is now a young man of 16. The Young Lives team was not able to interview him this time because he is away for several months working with his father harvesting coffee. So we spoke to his mother instead, using a Quechua translator.**

Manuel's mother is sitting on the patio of her house. She says she wants to take advantage of the good weather. She puts a woven blanket on a log and offers it to us as a seat. A few of her eight children are playing in the yard. The oldest is making torches out of reeds for a parade.

Their house is quite small and slightly tilted to one side; the roof is made of tin and the walls of adobe (sun-dried earth). The interview is often interrupted by the noise of the sheep. Sometimes a child will answer a question for their mother if she seems unsure of her response.

Last time we visited, Manuel's mother had been very worried because her husband had taken Manuel to work with him in the rainforest for a period and they had not returned. Finally, Manuel had sent a message that he was on his own and so she had gone to fetch him. Manuel's father did eventually turn up, but by this time his wife had officially registered his disappearance.

This time, Manuel has gone again with his father to pick coffee in the rainforest. He has been away for several months. His mother says he is studying at a private school at weekends.

She says he is lazy and cannot cook, but also that when he is home he is happy to look after his younger siblings and take them around. She is worried that because he is only studying at weekends, he is falling behind with his education.

*"I worry about my son because we're not together.*

And you are not able to talk with his teacher where he is? You don't know if he's doing well or not?

*No."*

She says that Manuel's father is not interested in their children's education: "Their father doesn't care at all about the children's studies. I'm the only one telling them to study." She says that if Manuel left school altogether, it would be because he didn't have his father's support:

*"His father tells him that if he wants to study, he'll support him, but he doesn't say he'll work and make sacrifices so that Manuel and the others can go to school. They can study if they want to, or not study. It's not his problem, he says."*

Manuel was 12 years old last time we visited him. His family are Quechua, the largest of 42 indigenous groups in Peru. Like many Quechua people, Manuel's family live in a rural area in the Andes mountains. Manuel had missed a lot of school and was older than the usual age for his school grade. He said that he liked school and thought he lived in a beautiful place.

She herself worked in the fields from the age of 15. "I worked even harder than people do today. I worked on the farm. I carried more potatoes. I liked the work, probably because I hadn't been to school."

Manuel's mother says that when she was a child, she felt her father loved her more than her mother, as he was always worried about whether she had enough to eat. She attended 1st grade, but then had an accident while playing with another girl and injured one of her legs. After that she was afraid, and refused to stay on at school, so she went work on the farm.

She met the father of her oldest daughter when she was 16 and had the baby at 17. He left her shortly afterwards. At 20 she got together with her current husband and they had seven children together, almost one a year. The youngest is now 3 years old. Her oldest daughter is now a mother of twins.

She says her husband spends long periods in the forest. They have separated, and he no longer sends her money. She says she no longer loves him. She doesn't want to have any more children with him. But she believes the family situation has improved because her children are growing up and her eldest son is helping financially. He works as a day labourer and on the family farm. She weaves blankets and buys and sells sheep, although her health is not good.

"What would you like your children to be like?"

*They should be respectful.*

When he's grown up, what would you like Manuel to be like?"

*I want him to be affectionate and caring and when he's asked to do something, I want him to listen to me."*

She says that Manuel told her he wanted to be an engineer in the navy. She will support him in whatever he wants to do in future, but the initiative must come from Manuel himself.

"And if he decides to stay and live here for his whole life, what would happen? Would he be well here?"

*He will stay poor, like me, if he stays here."*

*"I want him to be affectionate and caring and when he's asked to do something, I want him to listen to me."*

Manuel's mother

## Indigenous children and education

The country's original inhabitants, the Quechua and Aymara and other indigenous groups, have their own unique cultures and languages. Like Manuel's family, Quechua-speaking people mainly live in rural areas, especially in the Andes and the rainforest, which means that they are likely to lack public services such as running water, electricity and sewage. They also face social and economic disadvantages. They have the highest levels of poverty: 78 per cent, compared with 40 per cent of children who have Spanish as their mother tongue – and the lowest numbers of children attending school at all levels.

Indigenous children were excluded from schooling until the mid-twentieth century. Even today, many children from indigenous groups do not have access to bilingual education, which by law should be available at primary level. The schools they attend are often poorly equipped and resourced. This in turn has a negative effect on their learning – only 6 per cent of Quechua children performed at the expected level for their grade in reading comprehension in their mother tongue and only 19 per cent performed at the expected level in reading comprehension in Spanish.

More than 20 per cent of Young Lives children are Quechua, and our research also shows that they face significant educational disadvantages. A UNICEF study using information from the 2007 national census found that only 72 per cent of the older Quechua children (aged 15) finished primary school, compared with 87 per cent of Spanish-speaking children. And only one in three finished secondary school, compared with two-thirds of Spanish speakers. Indigenous children are also more likely to have repeated one or more years and be above the usual age for their grade – something that Manuel also experienced while he was in school.

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**Sources:** Patricia Ames (2012) 'Language, Culture and Identity in the Transition to Primary School: Challenges to Indigenous Children's Rights to Education in Peru', *International Journal of Educational Development* 32.3; UNICEF (2010) *Estado de la niñez indígena en el Perú [State of indigenous children in Peru]*.

*“He will stay poor, like me, if he stays here.”*

Manuel's mother



## Country context: Peru

Peru is now considered a 'high human development' country, rich in natural resources. It currently ranks 80 out of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index. It has a population of 29.4 million people. For the last decade, the economy has been growing at over 5 per cent each year. Even during 2009, when most of the world economy stagnated or deteriorated, growth continued in Peru, although at a lower rate.

But the country's strong economic performance has not been matched in terms of poverty reduction. There are widening gaps between different sectors of the population (especially between Spanish-speaking and indigenous populations and between people living in urban and rural areas). Social expenditure is low, although there are a number of government programmes targeted at the poor.

- The overall poverty rate decreased by 17 per cent between 2004 and 2010, but a third of the population still lives in poverty.
- While 19 per cent of people in towns are poor, this rises to 51 per cent of people in rural areas.
- Migration from rural to urban areas is common. About 30 per cent of the population lives in the capital city, Lima, and 55 per cent lives on the narrow coastline (including Lima).
- Levels of poverty, infant mortality, maternal mortality and malnourishment among indigenous groups are twice as high as national averages.

### Children

- Of the 3.8 million Peruvians living in extreme poverty, 2.1 million are children.
- Children in the poorest areas – city slums, the Andean Highlands and the Amazon rainforest – are ten times more likely to die before the age of 5 than the children from the richest 20 per cent of families.
- Almost all children now go to primary school. Enrolment in secondary school is low compared to primary, but it is growing.
- But repetition of grades and temporary drop-out from school are common, leading to a high percentage of children who are 'over-age', or older than the norm for the grade they are in.
- The number of children who work is high. Boys are more likely to be employed in paid activities and girls more likely to work in the home.

**Sources:** [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk); UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report*; Santiago Cueto et al. (2012) *Tracking Disparities: Who Gets Left Behind? Initial Findings from Peru*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report.

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.

Young Lives is core-funded by UK aid from the Department of International Development (DFID) from 2001 to 2017, and co-funded by the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs from 2010 to 2014. Sub-studies are funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Oak Foundation.

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**Young Lives**   
An International Study of Childhood Poverty