



Lien's story

A profile from
Young Lives in Vietnam

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Lien's mother

Lien's story

Lien is now 16 and is a hard-working girl and keen on her studies. But because her family are poor, she feels she needs to earn money. And there are other family complications ...

Lien lives in the kind of house where people are always dropping in. The Young Lives interviewer notes that:

“The children often called their house ‘the common house’. I found this to be true especially at around 8 in the evening. Many people come here to chat. They all sit down on the floor. Every morning, some old people with grey hair sit by the table next to the patio to talk endlessly about politics. The topic that they were discussing today was Libya. I noticed that the coffee table outside was always full of teapots, cups, lighters and pipe tobacco. Today, there were also some sweets that I brought from Hanoi as a gift for the family.”

Lien's house has a small garden, to the right of the entrance. Each bed is sown with a different vegetable and Lien does all the hoeing. She showed us a new bed of water morning glory (a type of vegetable) which had just been planted. There were also two beautiful blossoming mango trees.

Lien is still a shy girl. Her mother says she has grown up a lot in the last three years, and has nothing but praise for her daughter. She says she is neat and tidy and the most hard-working and resourceful of her three children. She is good at drawing too, and makes beautiful origami figures to give to friends and family: “The one she likes the most is the paper peacock, which is very colourful and meticulously made.”

The Young Lives interviewer, who stayed with Lien and her family for several days, also had many complimentary things to say about her. “She is quiet and hard-working. She is independent and determined and helpful to others. She seldom smiles but she has a cheery smile every time she does.”

Two years ago, Lien had a great disappointment: she failed her high school entrance exam, which was a great shock to her as she had always been a good student. This affected her greatly, and happened at around the same time that her grandmother died. She cried a lot, said her sister.

But eventually Lien collected herself and decided to earn enough money to retake the exams. The next time, she passed. She was very proud of this. She now goes to the local high school. She enjoys her work and friends and hopes to go to university one day.

Lien was 13 when we last visited her. She lived with her parents and her brother and sisters in an economic development zone on the edge of Hanoi, the capital city. Even at the age of 13, Lien had to look after the house and family when her parents were at work, and take her siblings to school.

Lien has an older sister who was not at home last time we visited. Her sister went to university, which was a great achievement. But now she is at home and cannot find work and her mother embarrasses her by constantly asking anyone they meet if they can find her a job.

Lien also has a younger brother. Both parents say they were happy to have a boy after two girls. Her father says: "I was very happy when he was born. Like everyone else, I feel very happy having a son." Lien's mother worries about him, as she says he has started to behave badly. She points to his new hairstyle, which is shaved at the back and long on top. His sisters, however, say that nine out of ten boys have this hairstyle.

As well as going to school, Lien sews shopping bags for an international furniture chain. She uses the sewing machine that her parents bought her several years ago. At noon, after she gets home from school and has lunch, she sews until 4 or 5 in the afternoon with the help of her sister and sometimes her brother. There is a big pile of blue woven bags scattered on the floor. She is paid 450 dong (around 20 US cents) a bag. "The wage they pay is low but at least it's better than having nothing to do," says Lien's sister. "But sewing this kind of bag is a harmful job. Many people who work on them for a long time get bone and muscle pain." Lien's sister says that Lien is very good at sewing. "If she works for the whole Sunday, she can sew more than 200 bags and get a small salary of about 90,000 dong [around four dollars]."

Once she has finished sewing, Lien does her homework and helps her sister cook dinner. In the past, when her sister was still studying, she had to cook dinner for the whole family. In the evening, she studies for another half an hour. Lien says that next year when she has to prepare for university entrance she will focus more on her studies.

Lien's mother still works long hours, although now she is a construction worker. She wears a large patterned scarf to protect her from the sun and from debris falling on her head. She says she doesn't like her work, but the family needs the money and her husband contributes very little. The Young Lives interviewer eventually discovered why this was the case: Lien's father has a long-term mistress who used to be his boss. He has another daughter by her who is in primary school. He has also had a series of other affairs. He admits that he made many mistakes. He claims that it was his 'fate'. He repeats this many times during the interview.

"When did you start loving another woman?"

In 1992.

Before Lien was born?

Yes, before she was born.

From then on, you have had one or more than one lover?

More, I have had many love affairs."

Lien found out about her father's affairs when she was in Grade 3. She witnessed her mother's sadness and her father's frequent absences. Sometimes she saw her father hitting her mother. However, Lien and her sister told their mother to try to hide her feelings for the sake of the family.

Her husband's behaviour has put a major burden on Lien's mother, who has been the main financial supporter of the family for many years. This is partly why Lien has tried to work part time to have money to help her mother pay for the daily expenses and fund her own education.

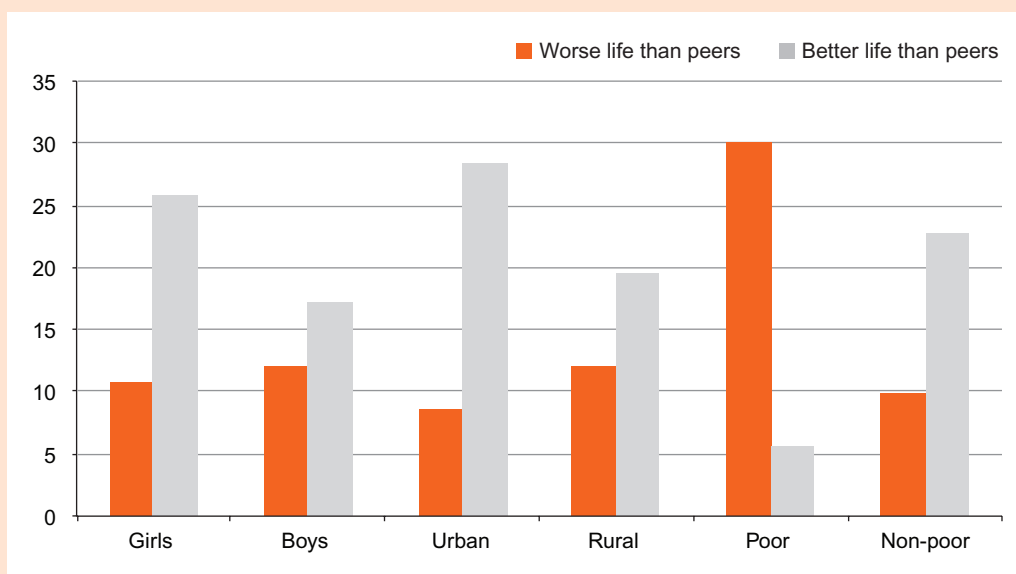
Lien's father claims that the problem is the difference in lifestyle between his and his wife's family. Lien's mother says she still loves her husband but his affairs have made her miserable. She also says that her children have tried to persuade their father to change his ways, but that it is too late.

She says her wish for her children's future is very simple. Drawing lessons from her difficult life, she just wants her daughters to find good husbands. She hopes that they will choose a suitable partner and find work easily.

Children's views of their lives

Young Lives is unusual not only because we are following the children for such a long time, but also because we ask them what they think about their lives. We can see from the graph below that a quarter of older girls and 17 per cent of older boys think their lives are better than those of their peers. Young people who live in towns are more optimistic than those who live in the countryside. Only 6 per cent of those who are poor think they have a better life than their peers, while 30 per cent think their lives are worse. So there is a clear link between poverty and young people's perception of their own lives compared with those of others. We also found that ethnic majority children are more positive than ethnic minority children, and those whose parents completed primary school are more positive than those whose parents have little or no education.

Young people's perceptions of their quality of life (%)



The younger group of children seems more optimistic than the older group; 40 per cent of both girls and boys think their life is better than that of their peers.

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.



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; 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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Young Lives 
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