

Soha

The horrifying past and magical journey in the motherland of the Vietnamese-born female writer was honored by the German President

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"I was abused by my biological father for 9 years. He always repeats the same sentence: 'You're just a throwaway'."



Years later, that "things away" became writer Isabelle Müller, who is famous in Germany for her anti-sexual abuse activities, and was honored by German President Joachim Gauck.

Isabelle Müller is also the founder of the LOAN Foundation to help thousands of children in the mountains of Vietnam escape the darkness of poverty and uneducatedness.

She does not live for revenge. She chooses to love – and rewrite fate. For yourself. And for children who once had no future.

01.

"I used to think
that only death could
free me."

I know she went through a hurtful past. But when you've gone more than half of your life and looked back, what hurts you the most?

When I talk about the past, many people will probably find it dark, dirty and breathtakingly harsh. Everything I have – clothes, bedding, even – toys are picked up from the landfill. We were not allowed to bathe, until the stain was visible on the flesh. Because even bathing costs money. Father beat us cruelly. Since I was very young, I witnessed him having an affair, then returned to torment his mother. I grew up with the extreme contempt of my grandmother and those around me, just because of my roots.

But the most painful thing is definitely the fact that being sexually abused by my biological father at the age of 8 – lasted for 9 years.

It's a cruel nightmare! A betrayal from someone who should have been a support. There was a time when I believed: Only death can liberate!

Worse, he – who hurt me – always repeats: “You're just a throwaway”. Those words stuck, becoming the first prejudice I had to endure, even when I was just an inanimate child. That pain silently destroyed me, making me believe I had no value!

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So why did she choose to write it into a book? They say, there are wounds that bleed more and more again...

Writing about being abused is the nakedest thing I've ever done – as if I were naked in front of thousands of people.

Many times, I wanted to give up! Every word I write pulls me back to horrifying memories, forcing me to relive the darkest moments I've ever tried to forget. It was a very painful journey, also the most terrible challenge that a shy person like me had to overcome.

But then I remembered why I started. I need to break the – silence not only for myself, but for those who have ever been in that situation. People who also carry shame, feel abandoned, and don't know how to speak up. I want to be a voice in the midst of chaos, and a real voice. Because I know, saying all – even though it's cruel – can still be a lifeline. Not just for me, but for others as well.



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And do you believe you have done that?

Sure! You know, when the publisher in Germany asked me to write a memoir, I never told them about being abused by my biological father. Other parts of my life have been enough to make them feel significant.

But if I don't write that part of the darkness, the story will never be complete. To have me today, there have also been such horrors. I don't want to tell half-heartedly, I don't want to hide the truth. If I'm not honest, I will always be just a deficient version of myself.

02.

"I lived differently when I began to doubt what my father said"

If writing a book isn't entirely a way to heal, then what really helped her overcome her trauma?

The turning point came when I started to doubt: What my father said – and the definition of value he assigned to me.

I gradually realized the good things around – and started comparing. I did things he could never do. At that time, I suddenly woke up: I'm not useless. I am much stronger than him.

I practice that way of thinking every day. Standing in front of the mirror, I said to myself: You have value. You are not just a number 0.

During that journey, my mother – Loan mother – was the most important person. But there is also a kind woman in Germany, like a “second mother”, who helped me a lot as a child. And my husband – who has always been by my side until today – has played an indispensable role in that recovery process.

What keeps me strong are not big actions or flashy promises. It's the people who silently showed up at the right time: a teacher who encouraged me in the midst of despair at school, a friend who kept his promise, someone who looked at me with respect, like the real me. Mine.

They are the quietest but most beautiful pieces of color in my life – is the reason I can stand as I am today.



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How did your mother – Vietnamese woman named Loan – affect you?

Mother is the one who saved me. In "Loan – From the life of a phoenix", I told about Mrs. –, a resilient Vietnamese woman who grew up in a society full of prejudice against women.

From a young age, her mother was forced into marriage and sold into a brothel by relatives. But she did not fall. Mom built her life on her own, found love and was ready to let it go as soon as she was betrayed – even though she was pregnant. After the death of her first child, she chose the name – Loan – as a symbol of the reincarnated phoenix.

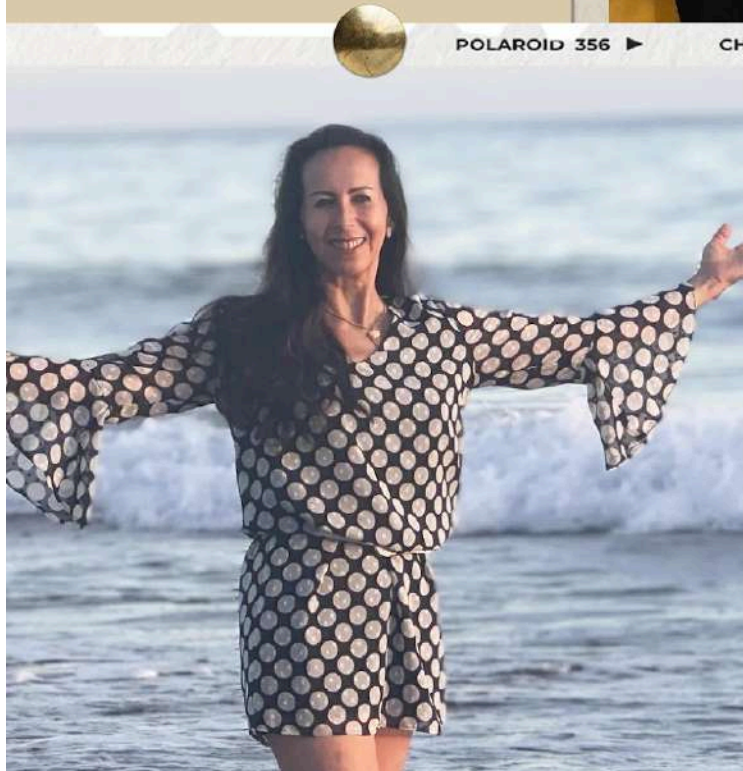
My mother was raped by the French army, gave birth in the middle of the war, and then got pregnant alone and crossed the sea to Europe to find my father, a French expeditionary soldier. Stigmatized and betrayed many times, the mother still stayed in a foreign land, raising her 5 children with all her strength. Even when my father was seriously ill, his mother was still the one who was on his side and came back to life from the door, because of kindness. Loan's mother proved: There are people who come out of the depths of suffering but still choose to live kindly. And if a person has been trampled and betrayed and still maintains a loving heart, then love is something that cannot be destroyed.

It was my mother who motivated me to go to school. Thanks to you, I understand that: No one –, including parents –, is responsible for their happiness. I stop blaming circumstances. I forgive my father, not because he deserves – but because no matter how much suffering he has caused – he is only a part of my journey. It was I who decided how to live...

And I choose to love!

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03.

"I don't help poor
people. I believe they have value
and need opportunities"

Is that why you choose to love children in the remote mountains of Vietnam?

That's right. When I look at them, I feel like I'm – innocent, innocent, even in the midst of adversity.

What touched me the most was when those children brought the fire of love they had received, then spread – and continued to spread, changing other people's lives. That's the power of giving opportunities: not just helping a person, but helping them become a ripple point.

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When I look at them, I see myself again – innocent, naive, even in the midst of adversity.



Has anyone ever made her see that really happening?

I still remember a little girl who lost both parents, grew up poor, and thought she couldn't set foot in a university lecture hall. But thanks to a scholarship from the LOAN Foundation accompanying me for 4 years, I not only completed my studies but also reached my dream of studying for a master's degree in tourism. Now, I can stand firmly on my own two feet.

I always hope there will be more children like that – who become doctors, engineers, teachers... then returned to that poor countryside to take care of and change their community. Many children have seen their loved ones leave only because of lack of medicine and medical care. And that is what motivates children to dream of becoming doctors.

But is there any child that she cannot forget because of her "giving"? There was a little girl in Ha Giang (now Tuyen Quang province - Reporter). I really wanted to go to college, but my family forced me to stay and work in the fields. One night, I packed my luggage, took the bus to Hanoi, and escaped from home. When I arrived, I stood in the middle of the street and called the teacher: "I want to go to school, but I don't know where to start". That teacher contacted Ha Giang Department of Foreign Affairs – where she once knew me through a TV show. They asked if I could help. I answered immediately: "I will help."

I was granted a scholarship, studying and working two jobs at the same time to support myself. A year later, she wrote us a letter: "Now I am independent enough, even though I am not rich, I am happy. I want to cede the scholarship to someone else who needs it more."

I think, that girl is one of the people I will never forget. Not only do I take the – opportunity, but I also know how to give it back.

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She is one of those people I will never forget. She not only took chances – she gave them back.



04.

"I have never cried before children"

Have you ever met a child who really wanted to help but then realized she couldn't?

Yes. One time, I asked a boy about his mother. She shook her head and said softly: "I don't know where you're going... Mom has left."

At that moment, if you look at my face, you will see the pain cut into streaks. And I'm helpless. I wished I could hug you like a mother – but I'm just a stranger.

My mind swirled with a question: "What can I do? I can't cry in front of you". I know, money cannot fill the void of intimacy. But sometimes, financial support is still the only thing I can give – to keep your family afloat, and you have a little more peace.

Since that incident, the LOAN Foundation's scholarship program was born.



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But sometimes, financial support is the only thing I can give.

I want to ask more about the – limits when you yourself have to accept that you can't help them all.

After a big storm, a baby lost his father, abandoned by his mother, lives with 7 siblings. The eldest brother takes the burden of the whole family for his parents until he is exhausted and chooses death to end his life.

The second brother stood up instead. I miss school, work as a hired laborer, and every morning I carry my sister 8km across hills, mountains, and forest streams to go to school. I said: "As long as she learns the word." Faced with such sacrifice, my heart sank.

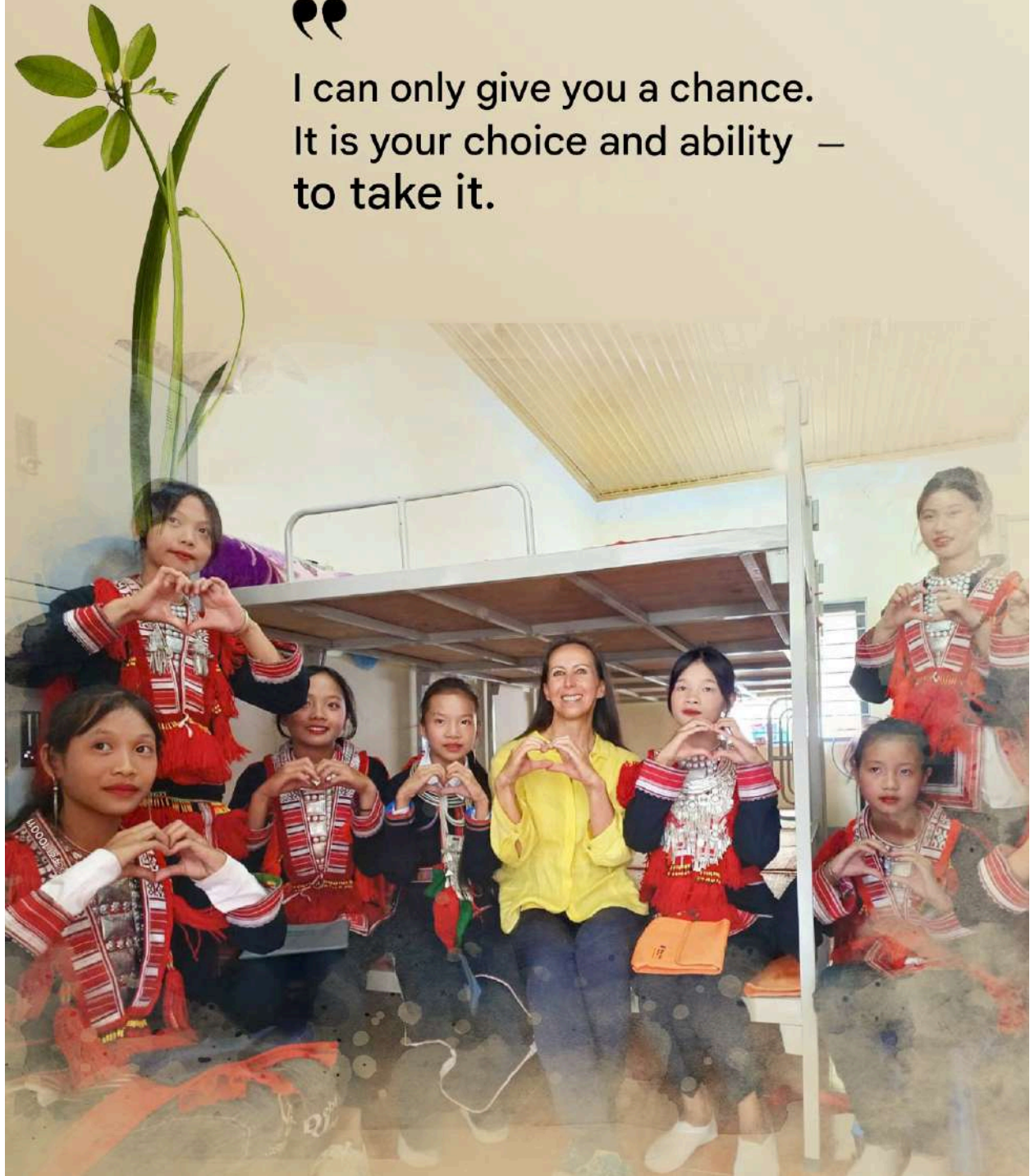
We have accompanied that family since that day: awarding scholarships to each child, finding long-term sponsors. But then, the older brothers still had to miss school. The children go to work as workers and get married early – is like a spiral that cannot escape.

Now only two young sisters continue to go to school. We still try to explain the importance of education. But honestly, I know: Maybe, you'll have to stop too, because of the burden of making a living...

I can't force anyone. I can only give one chance. And holding it – is your own choice and ability.

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I can only give you a chance.
It is your choice and ability —
to take it.



05.

"With the LOAN Fund, my mother's spirit lives on"

What did you get from founding the LOAN Foundation?

I got happiness. I believe that we have created opportunities for poor children in Vietnam – and at the same time, are fulfilling my mother's dream. A dream that she never had the chance to fulfill for herself.

Through the LOAN Foundation, I feel that my mother's spirit is still alive. It is an affirmation that love will always be enough to support many others. And her spirit of resilience and kindness will never be forgotten.

You have many admirers and supporters. But do you still feel lonely?

Yes. I think that is natural – especially for those who work in the arts. I need silence to listen to myself. And perhaps because since I was little, I have lived in silence – not allowed to speak, not daring to speak, even though my heart is still full of life. Over the years, that silence has become a part of who I am. I am used to loneliness, but in it, I also keep many memories of compassion and sincerity.

And in Vietnam - your mother's homeland, is that feeling present?

No. The schedule here is always packed. But when I close my eyes after a long day, I always feel peaceful. Vietnam is a part of my flesh and blood - warm and familiar. I have received a lot of love and companionship.

What touches me most is the spirit of "being ready for others" in the Vietnamese people. It is present very naturally - not noisy, not ostentatious. Not only material support, but also spiritual support, arms reaching out at the right time, eyes of understanding and trust.

I believe that although this country is not as large or rich as many other countries, the hearts of the Vietnamese people are extremely large. And that is what makes our journey meaningful.

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So after the LOAN Foundation was honored at the Human Act Prize 2023, has this project changed in Vietnam?

The Human Act Prize is a huge honor for us. It has led to greater recognition of the LOAN Foundation, not only domestically but also internationally. After that, I received a lot of contacts, many organizations knew and understood better about the work we were doing.

I hope more and more people will accompany us – to continue to bring a better future to the poorest children in Vietnam, through education.

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But honestly, I still want to keep it on a scale that I can directly monitor. Because I don't want to turn kindness into a machine. I want to keep it within reach – enough to love and take responsibility.

Of course, if one day the LOAN Foundation wins the lottery, or someone generously gives a huge donation, I will use it all to help more children. Not a penny is wasted – I promise! (laughs).