

Did you know that ‘democracy’ is a Greek word?

Citizens must have their say and they must make the government responsible for their actions. So citizens’ feedback counts. Participating in elections counts. Sadly, in some countries only less than half of voters take part in elections. In other countries the number of voters has been declining more and more. Therefore Greece and Belgium, for example, have made their elections compulsory to every citizen.

In Estonia, too, I have heard people say that they won’t go voting because they couldn’t care less. But later they aren’t satisfied.

Hey, people, it is all up to you! It’s democracy! You can choose and vote for what you want. So go and make your government and your country work for you!

Some people already have. Many young people have. For instance, hundreds of students have joined environmental groups for cleaner nature or protest groups against child labour. Also, young people have created NGOs to make their voice heard. These organizations are important. They represent the views of young Europeans.

In the end, democracy is nothing but “of the people, by the people, to the people” as Abraham Lincoln once said.

What comes up to your mind when someone says human rights? The first thing that came to my mind is the fact that we have the right to life and we are all born free and equal. These are the rights we take for granted. Sadly, not everyone in the world has these rights.

Human rights can protect you, but they also tell you how to behave. They say that we all are equal no matter our race, skin colour, wealth, gender or age. And yet, there are so many problems with human rights yet to solve! For example, inequality between men and women.

Women right issues are the biggest in Africa, Asia and Middle East.

- Typically they have to work longer and harder than men, but they earn much less.
- Other women can’t work because their fathers or husbands won’t let them.
- Many girls are not allowed to get to school.
- In Africa, many young girls are genitally mutilated.

- Still others are forced into marriages where love and respect are not present at all.
- Basically these women have no rights. They can't choose their partners. They can't travel, study, go to work or open a bank account without their guardians' permission.

Luckily, the rights of Saudi Arabian women have been improved a little as there are activists who stand up for them. So are the rights of African women.

Let me end this part by citing Mary Wollstonecraft, "I do not wish women to have power over men: but over themselves."

Lastly, I am going to talk about intolerance and discrimination.

I'd say that we talk about this a lot. Especially now, when Europe is facing the refugee crisis. There are several reasons why some people are rejected or even hated by others; for example, race, culture, religion and sexual orientation.

Racism means discrimination. Racist people are prejudiced towards otherness. They think they are better than other people. Racist ideologies have justified slavery, colonialism and holocaust. Still, scientific research shows that race is not a biological category. Quite the contrary, all humans belong to same species!

Closely related to racism is xenophobia. It's the fear of foreigners and foreign countries. The more "different" some people perceive the other person, the stronger fears and negative feelings they tend to have.

In 2015, The Estonian Human Rights Centre organized an inquiry among twenty dark-skinned people who are currently living in Estonia. Nearly everyone said that they had experienced race hate insult and rejection in public space. One respondent said that local doctors had refused to treat him because of his skin colour. That they had been scared of some specific illnesses only black people have.

So what can we do about intolerance and discrimination? Let me use the words of Nelson Mandela, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change a world." So let's use education as a weapon against those who cause hatred in our world!

I hope you have understood my point, and I believe that we all can make a difference. Especially, when we're active and take part in democracy, stand out for ourselves, and fight for the rights of less fortunate people. We must be and remain tolerant towards each other! It all starts with us. So let's become true role models to other young people all over the world!

Delivered by Kristi Kütt

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Youth and crime

I'm going straight to the topic of my choice and use our freedom of speech to talk about something that is fairly close to me. Youth. And criminals. By 'a criminal' we think of somebody who has disobeyed the law. But... haven't we all committed a petty crime or misdemeanours?

I believe that most people have done something that is somewhat illegal. I certainly have. I have crossed the road in a wrong place; I have ridden a bike without a helmet; I have consumed alcohol; I've smoked a cigarette - you name it! Well I haven't drugs or weed, I'm not that rebel yet. Does that all make me a criminal? Should I be in jail or pay fines? God forbid lock me up! Some say that you can do anything as long as you don't get caught. So – is that true?

Let me give you a little more drastic examples. What about a killer who doesn't get caught? Does it make him innocent? No way! Most of us would agree that he or she, the gender bias, should be locked up. If all of us commit some criminal action then why hasn't everyone been punished for our "criminal actions"? Yeah, why not? Let's classify those actions as misdemeanours. "If you have many of those, we'll punish you, and it'll all be swell!" Seems like that works, too. After all, who am I to argue with a system that has been in work longer than most of us have lived?

I'm sure my parents know what I have done - they are not that naive. Besides they have asked and I have told. I live by the rule: if you don't ask, I won't tell.

I don't know that much about the social life of teenagers in other EU countries, but I cannot imagine it being much different. Of course, it all comes down to how you were raised (brought up), but even the best parents, who do everything right with their children, may eventually find out that their "sweet little baby" is smoking, partying - even doing drugs!

In Estonia, if you are under the age of 14, your parents will be responsible for your actions, and when you get older, your parents will pay a fine. They'll put it on your record and some jobs might become "unavailable" for you afterwards. But that is pretty much it. In 10 years, no one is going to care if you were caught drinking when you were 16. Why? Because everybody has stuff in their past that they are not proud of. So are we all criminals?

Yes – we indeed have set ourselves rules, laws and boundaries. And most of the time for a good reason. But the line between a wrong deed and a criminal deed is rather blurred. We have a law that says that an action like drinking or smoking from a young age is unacceptable and wrong, but the public opinion sees it otherwise. Some people even say that it's ok.

How is that good for any of us? By ignoring the rules (that) we have made we set ourselves and our children up for failure. For example, my father is really strict and doesn't really want me to go out and party very much. Yes, I know, it's because he cares about me. But the stories I have heard from my uncles are far worse than what I'm actually doing.

So technically, the rules haven't changed that much. My parents have broken some rules, and I have broken some rules. Why on earth do people greet me with rolling eyes then?! Why do they show me their disappointment after I've come clean?!

My English teacher, who is an American, once asked us what we, the young Estonians, were most afraid of. He had noticed that many students at our school were afraid of failing and not being good enough. So he concluded that Estonian students seem a lot more concerned about their future than young Americans are, but we are also much more mature and independent. (Your teacher said or you think so?)

We later discussed in class what the reason could (might) be, and we came to a somewhat surprising conclusion. Namely, the Estonians as a nation with a rather sad past feel the need to constantly prove themselves useful. But it sometimes freaks us out and puts us under too much pressure. Teenagers are as worried as grownups are. But they act differently. Most of the time teenagers find it is easier to just go party ... party so hard that they forget about the things they HAVE to do, even if it's just for a night!

I myself am a workaholic. I need to work hard to feel complete, to feel good. It's a closed circle, I know. It is very, very hard to get some rest! Besides partying, I've found relief in running, too. One might say I'm constantly "running away" from my problems.

So, is behind every 'crime' that a teenager does stress and fear of failure? Probably not. There are countless reasons that drive people do different things, also crimes. Everyone has their own way of coping with stress and life, but the boundaries that we've set ourselves often make us feel like criminals, which eventually put us under even more stress. How is that any good?