

How to fight extremism in the 21st century

by Rebecca Gebauer presented at the International Young Program 2014

If we fail to show courage now, we will leave revolution, civil war or subjugation to our children and children's children.

Would you agree to this statement? Do you think it is a bit radical but it has a point?

This quote is taken from the website of the English Defence League. It shows how extremism enters our societies like a wolf in a lambs clothing.

Extremism is found everywhere in the world – the EDL in Britain or Neo Nazis in Germany frequently march European streets promoting dread and hatred against the different. In Hungary the radical far-right party Jobbik is about to become second in parliament while actively campaigning against Gypsies and Jews. Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Pakistan or al Shabaab in Somalia attack innocent citizens to spread fear and to make way for their agendas which they hide in religious reasoning. **These right-wing and religious extremists surely would oppose the thought of having anything in common but they do share a similar strategy. They all claim to work for the greater good.** The EDL calls itself a human rights organisation, Neo-Nazis and Jobbik claim to protect their nations and Islamist groups aim on following the demands of their religion.

However – extremism is not automatically a bad thing. Martin Luther King once said: *"The question is not if we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be."* King also was confronted with violent extremism – but he demanded a better, a peaceful and progressive extremism. Recently I came across a forum post of a young man who introduced himself as a 16-year-old EDL member of good education. He passionately defended the values of the EDL and asked people not to believe what media and government would spread about them. Reading through the young man's words it was obvious that the education he got did not sensitized him for what human rights really are. The EDL presents "Human Rights" and "Democracy and Rule of Law" as their key aims and objectives – but this young man was not able to see the deceitful nature of their mission statement. Similarly, Islamic extremists manage to radicalise their members so much that they are willing to give their lives for the cause of their groups without questioning.

So what is it that makes people overlook or ignore that they become part of violent extremism? What do they find in it? Why can they not distance themselves and see the real picture?

Partially it is the amazing ability of extremist groups to value their members. Already Hitler knew how to manipulate masses by giving them a sense of fellowship and purpose. **But much more - and that might come as a surprise – it is the huge lack of education as much in the West as in developing countries.** Education is far more than learning how to read and write. It is to equip people with the capacity to value and understand things and to find their own judgement about them. In the West people have to be educated to realise what a blessing it is to live in peace with widely secured human rights. We are trampling our forefathers heritage with heavy boots because we take for granted what they fought for even with their lives. **We take our freedom so much for granted that we even get bored and search for meaning in our lives and often get unsatisfied – a gap which extremists are much too willing to fill.**

People in the developing countries probably have little clue what human rights are. Even if they can read circumstances never allow them to further their education because they are too busy tackling the challenges of daily life – and they take injustices as part of it. If extremists then offer a way out of the treadmills – who could simply resist?

The European Union has issued guide lines to fight extremism through "Education for Citizenship". It is part of curricula in all EU-countries – but sadly as an "additional over all content" rather than being prioritised as an individual subject. **Human Rights have to have their own room in all educational systems worldwide.** Our modern world offers many opportunities of communication and interaction – it has never been that easy to come together.

We need to use these opportunities and we need to take responsibility for those who do not have an easy access to them. Yearly programmes where people come together – literally or virtually - and actively debate the meaning and value of human rights need to be mandatory in our schools and universities. Governments should put the good intentions they express in their curricula into progressive action rather than cutting education budgets.

If we learn to value each other and what we have and out of that see our responsibility to actively help those who are still denied their human rights – then violent extremism will be deprived of its grounds to stand on. **We have to be Human Rights Extremists.**