

2021 International Essay Contest for Young People

[Children's Category – Honorable Mention]

## **What is life?**

(Original)

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Hi, my name is Mendigaz and I am an average teenager from Kazakhstan. I have always been satisfied with my life. Despite having some unlucky moments, my life is still filled with happiness and wonderful people. However, ever since I gained consciousness, I had a fear of future and confusion about the point of my existence and I never understood why.

I was born and raised in a small city of Karaganda, Kazakhstan and was surrounded by primarily Kazakh people. My parents had me after waiting for seven years, so I really held a special place in their life or in the words of my dad "I became their life". Being aware of my special role in their lives, the only purpose I had was getting their validation. But I never gave it a second thought, because despite being one of the most welcoming and warm communities with a very strong bond between people, it was the experience of almost every child and adult in Kazakh spaces to meet parents' expectations. Interestingly, such thoughts about children's upbringing have so deeply ingrained in the society that your life does not seem to belong to you when you even have become an adult.

But I have never realized that of course, until I have started hearing such phrases as "When you grow up you must...". Then people around me started asking about my future and about my plans on building a family. That was when I first realized after days of contemplating this was not what I wanted. All the words of my surroundings, the expectations, the social norms... this was not life. At least this was not what my life should be like.

I started noticing the main problems...stereotypes about women's role in the society, parents' high expectations affecting their children's decision-making skills negatively. But the worst thing that struck me deeply was my aunt's trauma experienced during her

“unplanned” [according to the society’s norm since she was not married at that time] pregnancy. She was a 25 year-old girl but her boyfriend could not marry her because his parents thought she was not a good match for him. She had a difficult pregnancy because of her unstable emotions and it affected her baby’s health negatively. I saw her crying all day but I felt helpless .All I could do was to look after her little son, an innocent creature which would look at me with his angel smile. Luckily, this story had a happy end and they got married when the baby turned 18 months old, but this story also made me realize the value of being “free” from preconceived ideas of the society. I understood that I can do a lot to make a difference in my community.

The problem our community has is looking at life through a lens of old traditions and seeing it as a way to appeal to others, while not giving enough attention to real social and environmental problems. You can be ashamed for wearing a short skirt but not for littering or spitting. I desperately want to change that and the first small step in doing so is spreading awareness through social media. Posting content of feminist creators that touched on gender inequality, sharing posts about environmental problems, telling people about the importance of abolishing some of the harmful stereotypes have been all the things I have done through Instagram. At school, I made a presentation on gender equality and health and well-being. Even though it was only two little steps, I saw good results. My relatives who were never interested in politics and environment started messaging me in DMs, eager to learn about them more.

As of now, I am planning even bigger events like filming a video about changing our lives to be more eco-friendly and working with big supermarkets to raise people’s awareness of littering plastic. We understand that to make drastic changes, general public would have to be involved more, but I hope that our actions will help our community to view life as an adventure and a journey of self-development and helping rather than following what was before you. I want to live a meaningful life ….