

'Young people are angry': the teenage activists shaping our future

Fed up with waiting for the older generation to sort out its problems, a growing number of teenage activists are taking matters into their own hands. Here, six motivated people reveal why they've decided to fight for a better world

In a political climate where most adults are inert with despair, a growing number of teenagers are responding with action. After 14 children and three adults were massacred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, it was students - not parents, teachers or political representatives - who organised themselves to campaign for changes to US gun laws. The March for Our Lives demonstration in Washington, DC on 24 March was accompanied by sister marches around the world: millions of young people supporting each other and demanding policy reform. Lead campaigner Emma González, a high-school student who now has more than 1.5m Twitter followers, made a call to arms for her peers to: "Fight for your lives before it's someone else's job."

González is one of many teenagers shattering the stereotypes of the lazy, entitled, self-obsessed millennial. More and more teenagers are noisily questioning the world they're inheriting and demanding things work differently. Here, we meet some of the young activists whose voices are increasingly impossible to dismiss.

lazy, entitled &
self-obsessed

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/may/13/young-people-are-angry-meet-the-teenage-activists-shaping-our-future>

READING RACE

Which teen activist ...

-wasn't warm enough to concentrate on her studies?

-felt that people in power were trying to conceal a problem?

-has discovered it is important to relax and show weakness?

-feels that news networks focus on trivial matters?

-met girls who only aspire to getting married?

-was discriminated against from an early age?

-attended demonstrations as a toddler?

-has parents with mixed emotions about what they are doing?

AMIKA GEORGE, 18, LONDON: CAMPAIGNING AGAINST PERIOD POVERTY



Last spring, I was watching the news when there was a report on girls in the UK missing school because they couldn't afford menstrual products. Some were using toilet paper, newspaper or socks. Thinking about girls my age going through this **hit me hard**. The report gained attention, but I felt the government was **sweeping it under the carpet** and we needed to pressure them to do something. So I did what felt normal to me and went online and started a petition. It calls for free menstrual products for children on free school meals. I didn't imagine even getting 100 signatures. But in between revising for AS exams, I emailed as many people, companies and universities as I could. I asked my parents to send it around their work. My dad was a bit reluctant at first, but he did.

There's huge embarrassment about periods, but it's something half the world's population will go through for a week every month. That it's a taboo holds us back in achieving gender equality. Within two weeks, the petition reached 2,000 signatures. Comments were divided between people being shocked that this happens and others saying it affects them or their friends. Hearing that made me want to fight harder.

When the general election was announced, I emailed the parties. The Green party and Women's Equality party both replied and included a pledge in their manifesto. I was so frustrated I couldn't vote. Then in December we organised a protest outside Theresa May's bedroom; more than 1,000 people came and shouted. To date, 150,000 people have signed the petition. It's sad when adults are surprised to hear a young person being politically vocal. Young people are angry about the state of the world and a lot of us use social media to articulate that. I get asked to speak a lot.

The other morning, a TV station sent a car to school, I left for an hour, spoke on the issue and came back to a history lesson. My parents are supportive and as surprised as me that this has **taken off**. My dad went with me to the Women's March, which was cool. But sometimes my mum can get annoyed if I'm doing lots of campaign stuff with exams coming up.

XIUHTEZCATL MARTINEZ, 17, COLORADO: CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVIST



If someone tells me I should be in school right now, I know that they don't **see the bigger picture**. Earth's ability to support human life is **falling apart** and if things don't change in the next five to 10 years, nothing's going to matter.

I'll finish high school, but right now this is the most important thing I can do with my time. Myself and 20 other kids are currently suing the Trump administration for violating our constitutional rights for failure to act on climate change. We originally launched it against the Obama administration a few years ago. The US government has known the fossil fuel industry is having a negative impact on our climate, yet they have been offering them subsidies and opening up land to exploration. We have just heard that we are going to trial in October.

I'm also involved in law actions and civil disobedience to stop fracking around my hometown of Boulder. In 2012, my friends and I successfully helped push for a five-year ban.

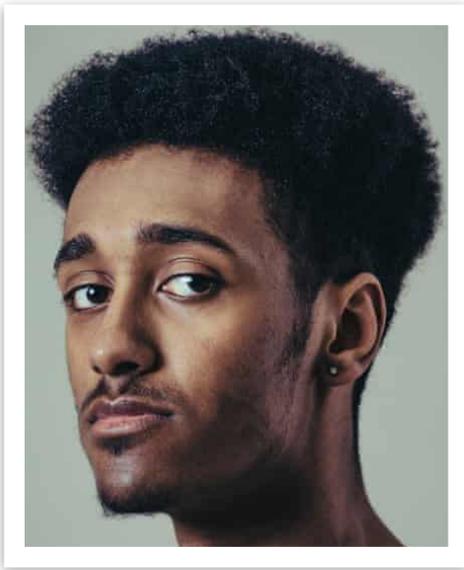
From a young age, I was aware of my part in protecting our planet. I was three or four the first time I went on a protest, and six when I started speaking at them. I was born in Colorado and have spent a lot of time in Mexico. My entire childhood was travelling, hanging out in nature and learning about my family's indigenous heritage. My dad taught me that we have a responsibility to protect the Earth the way that our ancestors did.

I've spoken at the UN about my work. I was surprised how disrespectful, disconnected and sterile it was. The delegates were on their phones, not listening. They **perked up** when they heard I was just 15 years old. The power of me speaking wasn't for them but for the millions of people my speech has since reached online.

The world is seeing how powerful young people are and how things are going to change. Adults on CNN and in the United States specifically, they can argue and cover gossip about Trump and his hair and porn stars. But young people are mobilising on the streets.

There's so much power in what's happening within our generation. We don't have the respect we deserve, but I think it's coming.

SHIDEN TEKLE, 18, LONDON: DIVERSITY IN THE MEDIA



I've been racially abused since about 12, but it was never seen as an important thing **to tackle**. At secondary school, white children called me disgusting things, but teachers would **turn a blind eye**. And not just to racism, but sexism, homophobia, transphobia. There's also internal racism in the Eritrean community. My dad is called names because he has darker skin. It all comes from preconceived ideas that black is less, or the darker you are the lower you are in terms of income, society and politics.

Because these problems weren't taken seriously, I normalised them. But when I moved to a sixth form where the majority of students are black girls, I was surrounded by political and social consciousness. The more educated I got, the angrier I became. Last summer, I joined an organisation called the Advocacy Academy and, with a small group of people my age, we launched a campaign challenging the image and under-representation of black people in the media. We recreated iconic posters, such as *Doctor Who*, *Titanic* and *Harry Potter*, and made all the characters black. The campaign is rooted in personal experiences and I've gone from talking about things with my friends in the lunch hall to speaking about them nationally.

The Academy has revolutionised the way I think. Back in the day I definitely upheld toxic masculine identities. I'd tell myself that I didn't cry. Challenging gender norms wasn't of interest to me because I wanted **to fit in** with my friends. But I've learned to **let go** of my ego and be vulnerable so I can say what's on my mind. It's allowed me to take all the cold anger I have built up over years and turn it into something good. I've learned to become an ally to many other issues that don't affect me directly.

After university, I don't just want to get a really good job, buy a big house and forget about my community. I want to change something and challenge the status quo.

MUZOON AL-MELLEHAN, 19, NEWCASTLE: EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN



Even before the war in Syria, I wanted to change society, but I knew I needed to get educated to do that. Back then, we had a normal life. We went to school every day and saw our friends. The war started when I was 11 or 12. Going to school became difficult. There were people fighting on the ground, there would be bombing, sometimes bullets. Sometimes school was just closed because of budgets. My father is a teacher, and he lost his job.

We left Syria five years ago, when I was 14. I was so worried about my future and education. We went to a refugee camp in Jordan. I didn't expect there to be a school, but I was happy to discover a caravan with a tent and some teachers. There was no electricity. We studied computing from a book. In the winter, it got so cold it was hard to focus on the teacher.

But school gave me hope. And I started to encourage other girls and boys to go, too. I would walk from tent to tent, caravan to caravan, persuading kids and parents. I met people who thought that because we are refugees, education isn't important anymore, or that they'd continue school when they returned to Syria. I encouraged people to believe in themselves and not give up. I met kids who'd never been to school, and girls who saw marriage as their profession. Some parents told me it had nothing to do with me. I fought hard for everyone to believe that we can't do anything without knowledge and got involved with international charities who supported me.

What's happening in my country is not of our making and it's not our fault that we're losing our rights. One day, we'll be able to return, and we need to have knowledge. After three years in Jordan, my family came to the UK. Last year I became the youngest and first refugee Unicef Goodwill Ambassador. I'm now on my way to university and am doubling my activism.