Should Age Define Social Change?

In an attempt to bring about social change in my society, I ran a social awareness campaign over the last two years in India. However, I was unable to see the desired results of my initiative due to perceived lack of authority attributed to my age and inexperience. Today, as the youth is taking over and trying to bring about social change it is essential to understand what hindrances and costs might come one’s way and how they may or may not enhance this experience of youth activism. My paper shines light on the perceived lack of authority that costs young activists moral distress and discourages them from taking charge to bring about change. I argue that young activists must be encouraged to step out despite the discouragements and costs that come their way because there is no better learning than one’s failures.

Adapting to social change is sometimes a result of activism by the youth. Society is an ever-changing institution that often needs adaptable mindsets, norms and ideas. How are we to adapt to these changes? Sociologists define ‘Social Change’ as “changes in human interactions and relationships that transform cultural and social institutions” (Roche). The young generation is impatient and ready to change the world. In an interview with UVAToday, Nancy Deutsch, professor and director of the University of Virginia Curry School of Education’s Youth-Nex Center to Promote Effective Youth Development said, “Having youth actively engaged in civic
activity and social justice movements opens us up to see and address issues from angles that adults may be blind to”. This can be attributed to young people voicing their opinions and using online platforms to reach others. These young minds are also those to think of new, out of the box ideas to bring about change. Today, the youth are known to take charge and voice their opinions on what should constitute “change”.

The youth are responsible for some of the most popular social movements today. In an article for Harvard Ed Magazine, Professor Meira Levinson was quoted saying, “We’re in a groundswell moment of youth activism”. This can be associated with the fact that today, many young people are angry with the state of society and are using this as stimulus to bring about change. In an article for The Establishment, Kaitlin Ugolik very powerfully wrote that “Almost everyone is angry about something right now, and if you’re a member of the millennial generation, it’s likely become part of your identity—whether you identify with it personally or not”. The result of this anger has been seen in many social change movements in the recent past. The most recent being the #neveragain movement advocating for gun control. We saw students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida launch this movement challenging senators and congressional representatives to prevent mass shootings from taking lives of innocent people. These groups of students gave many interviews, uploaded videos, visited the White House and have gained a following over the last few months in order to do get the country ahead on the gun control debate. They have not only reached a wide audience but have served as an inspiration to many young people sitting at home and not doing anything about the state of affairs. Similarly, the Black Lives Matter Movement was started by women in their 20’s and subsequently attracted thousands of students willing to fight for the cause. We saw this hashtag trending across all social media platforms as this movement gained momentum. This
movement was able to reach such a large audience primarily because it was established by the youth.

Young people today are taking initiative to bring about change, but reality remains that not much changes as a result of these movements. The shooting in Thousand Oaks in November this year, opened our eyes again to the fact that the #neveragain movement had failed to do its job and gun control laws in the US had not been altered. Similarly, we can see that not much has changed with respect to discrimination against the Black people across the world. We still open our eyes to headlines such as “Discrimination against black people ‘commonplace’ in EU” (Tidey) or “Facebook has a problem with black people, former employee charges” (Guynn). What this suggests is that majority movements by the youth are often unable to achieve their avowed objectives.

The youth today do initiate change over things they feel strongly about however, there are hindrances to their success. One of the major problems that comes one's way is the perceived lack of authority among the decision makers and older generations across the world. In her speech at the anti-gun rally in Fort Lauderdale days after the high school shooting in February 2018 Emma Gonzalez said, “That us kids don’t know what we’re talking about, that we’re too young to understand how the government works. We call BS” (Pires). This perceived lack of authority is often a reason why some of these movements tackling social change are unable to bring about the change they seek. In a post for Huff Blog Alexa Curtis, a high school student, was quoted saying, “the societal problem of how age is a deterrent no matter how responsible and mature you are”. Many young activists are often ceasing to achieve their goal because of this mindset.
This mindset was certainly an obstacle for me when I lead a movement for social change back in India. I always wondered why Fair and Lovely, a skin whitening cream, was a bestseller in a country of brown people? Why was the LGBT community not accepted by society? Why were gender roles so prevalent in the 21st century? The way we as a society spoke about women, the LGBT community and different races was something that needed and continues to need to change. A tone of disrespect and our implicit biases streamlined our discourse, where we often made derogatory remarks towards people of different races, religions and genders. In “Literacy, Discourse and Language: Introduction”, James Paul Gee highlighted that each of us acquire a primary discourse through primary socialization early in life. This often includes picking up terms, beliefs and values upheld by previous generations even though they might not be acceptable anymore. Back home I realized how as times changed, our discriminatory discourse needed to change as well. As a society we needed to be aware of how we were speaking and the social and psychological repercussions of the derogatory terms we used and the remarks we make.

Having personal experience with prejudice in my own family, I wanted to bring the issue of “biases” to the surface, and not allow it to continue to shape individuals negatively. To do this, I studied the history of bias in India, more specifically my society and surveyed random people at metro stations and bus stands on matters of color, gender and religion bias. I assimilated all the information I obtained into “Beyond Bias,” my social media awareness campaign on the eradication of biases. As part of my Beyond Bias campaign, I also conducted workshops with family and friends and organized awareness events at my school. My goal was to bring the subconscious racial biases we hold as a society to the forefront, which I believed was the first and essential step to addressing them. I visited local factory units, workplaces and held
workshops for family and friends. Through these conversations and discussions, I also aimed to ensure that everyone who I had spoken with accepted the fact that they were biased and were willing to change that. I went around talking to people or had them fill questionnaires at times. Each questionnaire or conversation would start with the question “Do you think you are biased?”. This question was followed by a series of questions and the last one would be “Do you think you are biased? If yes, are your biases justified?”. Often, people would come around to the fact that they are biased and that these biases that they hold are not justified.

However, my experience also demonstrated that an obstacle to making social change is that young people are often perceived as having little authority. Many pointed out that as a sixteen-year-old, I did not understand how society functions, which made it difficult from me to get through my message to all the people I had communicated with. For example, when I visited a local garment production facility and asked employees whether they believed biases exist in society, they were a little hesitant to answer the question honestly at first. As I made them realize that I was just here to have a conversation with them, they slowly opened up about the religious differences that exist in their workplace and how it impacts their judgement. Here, people of different religions did not communicate unless it was solely for the purpose of their job. They refused to eat together, sit together and sometimes even work together. They believed they were biased in many ways themselves, but their bias was justified. They claimed, what has been done or said for generations is being said for a reason and thus they didn’t think anybody could change their minds about the matter. According to them the fact their ancestors behaved or spoke in a certain way was enough to justify their biased behavior. In other words, given my age and lack of authority, I was unable to change their beliefs about justified biased. As a 17-year-old, I felt disheartened. This perceived lack of authority made me feel as though I didn’t have the
leadership skills to come through and bring about social change. I felt strongly about the issue and thus tried to initiate change however I failed in my endeavour. As I experienced, when young people’s efforts to make social change are thwarted by beliefs about their lack of authority, these young activists may become discouraged or give up attributing their failure to lack of leadership skills due to this perceived lack of authority.

What I felt after my inability to bring through change has been identified by studies in other fields as “moral distress”. Philosopher Andrew Jameton defined moral distress as “when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action”. This feeling of frustration, underconfidence and anxiety can be identified as a cost young people have to pay when they want to bring about some kind of change. Youth activism is often driven by feelings of what the youth believes is right and acceptable by today's generation. However, the institutions that perceive the youth as lacking authority make bringing about change difficult for the youth. This leads to a feeling of moral distress among the youth because they have little control over the hindrances that come their way while attempting to bring about social change.

Even with these obstacles, in my belief every young individual has is an inner activist and nobody should be hesitant to bring this out. In the book Leadership Can Be Taught, Parks quotes leadership scholar Ronald Heifetz saying, “I can’t think of any encyclopedia for you to learn more from than the encyclopedia of your own failures and successes” (pg). It’s important to realize that we might feel incapable to bring about change and a sense of moral distress regarding perceived lack of authority. However, we must bear this cost and not lose the motivation to take matters into our own hands. In a blog post for The Establishment by Kaitlin Ugolik, she claims that, “More and more of us are protesting, boycotting, calling out, and sharing memes that reflect
our anger about politics and social issues.” These experiences of failure are the ones that lead to
successful social change and make us more equipped for future experiences. While we may be
bogged down by the inefficacy of our efforts, it is important to realize that there are some
obstacles – like perceived lack of authority- we have little control over. Our failures in the long
run can only help us to better understand how to be successful activists. The initiatives of young
activists must not be halted by this perceived lack of authority and leadership. Steve Jobs
famously said, “The ones who think they are crazy enough to change the world are the ones that
actually do”. The young generation must embrace this craziness and take over the stage to bring
about the much anticipated and required change the world requires.
References


