

“Young Activists” Label Can Be a Burden for Youth Organizers

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Fatimata Cham, 19, grew up organizing around education inequality in the South Bronx, and wishes people discussed childhood more, “especially those who live in BIPOC communities who have to do this work in order to survive,” she says. Thinking back to the Sandy Hook shooting, she tells *Teen Vogue*, most of Gen Z experienced childhood by [having to learn how to advocate for themselves](#) and feeling the burden of solving problems that feel impossibly large. Cham says that as a Black person living in America, she hears a lot about Black trauma and little about [Black joy](#). “I think it took a lot of unlearning for me to understand that, yes, [activism] is a huge part of my identity, but it shouldn’t be the only source of my happiness, [or] the only source of showing up for myself.”

Paragraph 1: Describe what this paragraph is doing (not saying). For example: the author introduces us to an activist dealing with the topic of the article, and quotes that activist. Now do this for every paragraph in the article

Cham’s point about childhood seems to rarely appear in the national discourse of organizing and activism led by young people. The “youth” label opens up larger questions about the commodification of youth, how that pressure impacts social justice or political work, and the ways in which it affects the identities of young people working to change the world at the same time they’re trying to grow up in it. It’s a byproduct of a society that demands much of young people, and steals even more.

P2: Describe what this paragraph is doing (not saying):

“I basically was a professional teenage girl. You would not write about me without putting the word *youth* in front of my name,” Rayne Fisher-Quann tells *Teen Vogue*. In her teens, Fisher-Quann led one of the largest protests in Canadian history, becoming — to use language that she says “feels gross” now

— a prominent organizer, at a time media was latching onto young people and their roles as activists. “It’s terrifying to think about, what happens when you age out of that? When what you’re doing is no longer impressive because you’re not 16 anymore?” Society has always had a fetish for prodigies, Fisher-Quann says, even when the “youth” label doesn’t necessarily impact the work one does, it “just sort of makes for a better story.”

How the story is told matters. Sade Green, a writer, activist, and poet who focuses a significant part of her activism on advocating for racial representation and decision-making power for people of color in politics, tells *Teen Vogue* that “all young activists aren’t treated the same. I see a lot of young white activists and even non-Black activists of color receiving opportunities and recognition that young Black activists are denied.” In an email, Green said, “Young Black activists are ignored, called ‘[thugs](#)’ and ‘terrorists,’ [put on FBI watch lists](#), and murdered.” Green says she’s experienced both the stress of having not done enough by a certain age *and* the stress of having to grow up quickly in order to serve her community.

When asked whether being a young person doing this work has ever been used against her, Green says, “There have been times when I felt like I was overlooked or ignored because I was young and didn’t have 15-plus years of ‘experience.’ I know a lot of people who have 15-plus years of ‘experience’ and they are still the most unqualified people to hold the positions that they’re currently holding.” And the way we view “experience” is rooted in white supremacy, Green tells *Teen Vogue*, because the experience employers are often looking for is based on access — to internships that are often unpaid, certain job opportunities, and prestigious academic programs. That’s why Green believes, in many cases, lived experience should qualify as “experience.” “It is also important to emphasize that I’m not just young; *I am a young Black woman*,” Green adds. “If we are going to talk about how age plays a role in the political work being done right now, then we also have to talk about how race and gender factor into that.”

She shouldn’t have had to advocate for racial diversity in Congress at the age of 19 — it should’ve already been the standard, Green adds. “This stress is something that many Black youth know far too well,” she adds, citing the viral video of [Wynta-Amor Rogers](#), who happens to be from Green’s hometown on New York’s Long Island, at a Black Lives Matter protest over the summer. Contrary to comments excitedly admiring Wynta-Amor’s strength, Green says,

“There is nothing cute or admirable about having to fight for your life, especially when you are seven years old. Wynta-Amor should have been playing with Barbie dolls or toy cars, not protesting a genocide at the hands of the state. Black youth deserve to be young and free.”

Anti-Blackness is everywhere, Green says, noting how a disregard for Black lives shows up in policy, the criminal justice and health-care systems, academic institutions, and in the erasure of Black people’s contributions to our world.

In addition, tokenization of youth begs questions on who gets to be seen as a leader to begin with. “I think in the youth-organizer space, and how the media covers these movements, there is a lot of colorism and tokenization,” Cham tells *Teen Vogue*. “Some people listen more when the face of a movement does not look like me.” The media, she explains, tends to use representation as a way of communicating that change is happening, but “this can be toxic because it only centers one person as the face of movements when there are hundreds of people who are also working that we will never know the names of,” she says.

Capitalism has a huge part to play in this, Fisher-Quann says, because young people feel enormous pressure to make their childhoods exceptional, since it feels like the only way they’re ever going to mean anything later in life. Commodification of the youth identity that enables the exploitation of young people, or forces them to conform to norms of “professionalism,” can have a de-radicalizing function.

As Emanuelle Sippy, 17, points out, the work can be rife with tensions and contradictions. “On one hand, many of us are fighting for an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, abolitionist world, and on another, we’re working to the bone and competing with each other,” she tells *Teen Vogue*. She points out that supposedly youth-led organizations aren’t immune to barring young people from the decision-making process or abusing free labor, just as the concept of youth activism itself can’t be separated from ageism, classism, and racism. While organizing is future-oriented, she continues, it can create an alternative present. “We have to ask ourselves, how am I [or] how is an organization I work with reproducing some of the same forms of oppression we seek to eradicate?”

Fish Stark, 25, works as the global director of programs at Peace First. Peace First has created a year-long fellowship that allows individuals in their early 20s to develop skills for working in social justice long-term, mobilizing other young

people in their communities with career-transition support, competitive pay, and professional development funding.

In 2018, Stark recalled being in a breakout session for nonprofit leaders, hearing from a high-profile political leader who was giving a speech centered on “advice” for young activists in the audience. It wasn’t about how to organize effectively: “It was a full endorsement of the idea that youth activists should be performing certain norms of professionalism for adult approval and that this is the basis on which their work and their advancement in the field should be evaluated,” Stark says.

“Can you imagine how damaging that is to a 16-year-old? To hear that you’re constantly being evaluated, watched, and judged, when what you’re trying to do is just solve a problem that is affecting your community, that may be personally traumatic to you, and your career depends on how impressive you seem to a certain set of adults?” Stark asks. The trickle-down effect looks like choosing between doing what’s right — like speaking an unpopular truth or taking part in nonviolent direct action — and what is most inoffensive. Stark adds that it’s been made so that, as a youth activist, “you’re constantly being told, implicitly and often explicitly, that the work is only transformative if it gets attention.” It ruins young people’s lives, he says, and “shuts [out] many of the young people who are closest to the problems from participating completely.” He says he’s talked to so many youth activists who are anxious or depressed “who don’t even feel they can talk about it because they believe the world expects them to be unbreakable.”

That matters significantly in terms of how people are impacted by the “youth” label. “The teens and 20s are about the *process* of self-discovery and figuring out who we are,” says Alexis Redding, lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Activism allows young people to live their values, test their voices, and refine their sense of self,” Redding says. “Each of these things is central to the process of identity development.” Redding explains that young people are often at the forefront of the movements that have transformed society and pushed us all to do and be better. “But the responsibility is not theirs alone,” she says. “We have to support young people, listen to them, and help to amplify their voices.”

Now, Fisher-Quann organizes primarily with intergenerational abolitionist networks — a shift that she says changed her life. She points out that youth

nationalism, which she describes as the “idea that the young people are going to save the world and we’re going to do it by ourselves,” isn’t good for anyone, including the movements and people within them. That framing demands a greater interrogation: It seems less a matter of capability, and more a matter of what it means to be held up as a good or accomplished young person — and whether those should be the ultimate aim of organizing work. “Eventually, it just gives young people so much more to struggle with, when activism and youth are so closely intertwined when activism should be a lifelong affair,” Fisher-Quann says.