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Greta Thunberg: A Small But Mighty Voice for the Environment

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FYS 103.17: Gender Inequality & Intersectionality

Dr. Jeanne Buckley

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Abstract

This research paper discusses Greta Thunberg and the impact she has as a climate change activist. Thunberg faces many challenges as a young woman, but overcomes these difficulties while encouraging others to follow in her footsteps. She presents herself as a positive role model for younger generations. Thunberg has many accomplishments as an extremely young woman that leads to her global iconicity. She makes her power known in front of the highest ranked men in the world which forces legislation to make a change. Thunberg motivates others to make a difference before all hope is lost.

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I chose to focus my research paper on Greta Thunberg because she is a very powerful advocate for something I am extremely passionate towards: climate change. When I was in secondary school, I was fortunate enough to have a biology professor whose main concern was climate change. This professor would go on to explain all of the disastrous effects climate change was having on the world, making global warming a huge concern of mine. This ultimately led to my passion for the earth and my decision to major in biology as a student at Arcadia University. I followed Greta Thunberg as she began to change the world one speech at a time. As a young woman, she has always been a huge role model to me.

Greta Thunberg is a young woman who dreamed of a future where the world was not on fire; not dreams of becoming famous, or the whole world knowing her name. Greta Thunberg is an extremely influential young woman who is known for her climate change activism. During her rise to fame and power, she was just 15 years old, standing at a mere 5 feet tall. Thunberg comes from a middle class family who lived in Stockholm, Sweden. Thunberg's mother, Malena Ernman, is a Swedish opera singer. Her father, Svante Thunberg, is a relative of Svante Arrhenius, "a Nobel Prize-winning chemist who studied how carbon dioxide in the atmosphere increases the temperature on the earth's surface" (Alter, 2019, 17).

Thunberg was first affected by climate change while in primary school. After watching a film that explained climate change, she could not shake the terrifying feeling of witnessing starving polar bears lose their homes and extreme weather destroy earth's beauty. This was the start of her activism. She is young (and seems even younger), a woman, does not have an extreme amount of wealth, and is not known by many. At the time, much of the world viewed

Greta Thunberg as a naive girl. After Greta Thunberg was noticed, it would not be long until she took the world by storm.

Thunberg was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at a very young age. Asperger's is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in nonverbal communication and social interactions. It is also associated with repetitive patterns of behavior and interests.

Thunberg "suffered through periods of bullying and eating disorder before becoming an activist in 2018" (Oleson, 2020, 3). Her parents had to take time away from their work to help Greta through a period of depression when she was just 11 years old. This depression stemmed from Thunberg's constant concern about climate change's negative effects on the earth's future.

Although not as severe, Thunberg still battles with depression till this day. She turned what many viewed as weaknesses into strength and inspired others to believe in themselves too. This ultimately led to her global iconicity; however, not everyone was supportive of this young woman. Greta Thunberg's activism was met with hate and challenges. Many were not in favor of the power she was gaining as a 15 year old girl. Many questioned how a young individual, especially a woman, could have as much power as Thunberg.

Greta Thunberg faced an immense amount of backlash, but continued to conduct herself in such a positive way. When conflict arose with arguably the most powerful man in the world- the President of the United States- Thunberg did not back down. In response to Greta being named person of the year, President Trump tweeted, "So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old-fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!" (Stracqualursi, 2019, 3). Thunberg did not even let the President of the United States affect her feelings and actions toward climate change. She was a woman on a mission. Thunberg used this negativity to drive herself even more than before. She stood up to one of the most

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powerful people in the world. She responded to this incident by updating her Twitter bio. It read, “A teenager working on her anger management problem. Currently chilling and watching a good old fashioned movie with a friend” (Stracqualursi, 2019, 5). This took a tremendous amount of courage. Her wittiness was admirable. By not ignoring the hateful tweets, Thunberg showed others that age, gender, and “disabilities” do not define an individual’s power and impact on the world. Thunberg was also met with conflict with television personality Piers Morgan, but this did not deter her from her goals. Piers Morgan is a popular English broadcaster, journalist, writer, and television personality most known for his role on CNN. Thunberg was also challenged with talking in front of many powerful individuals. This would be intimidating for any young individual, especially someone who struggles with Asperger’s. She met with heads of state at the U.N. and even the Pope. This demonstrates how the pressure of these individuals’ positions did not shake Thunberg.

Greta Thunberg has already had many accomplishments throughout her lifetime. She was awarded 2019 Time Person of the Year. She began a global movement that started by skipping a day of school in which she “inspired 4 million people to join the global climate strike on September 20, 2019, in what was the largest climate demonstration in human history” (Alter, 2019, 4). Thunberg has made a moral call to action for individuals willing to listen. As a result, she has been celebrated in murals and even Halloween costumes. Thunberg has made such an impact that, “after she spoke to Parliament and demonstrated with the British environmental group Extinction Rebellion, the U.K. passed a law requiring that the country eliminate its carbon footprint” (Alter, 2019, 5). Implementing a law is a step in the right direction, and she played a strong role in making this happen.

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Thunberg impacted her peers and many younger generations by making individuals panic and fear the negative effects of climate change. She preached that a horrific future is inevitable if the people do not change. Studies have shown that, “Those who were more familiar with Greta Thunberg were more likely than those who were less familiar to intend to take collective action to reduce global warming” (Sabherwal, 2021, 48). Greta Thunberg affected how individuals viewed climate change. She made many want to take action to fix the problem at hand. As mentioned, many individuals joined Thunberg in her movement. Just like Thunberg, other students were skipping school to join her strike on climate change. The public was starting to pay more attention to this pressing issue. Greta Thunberg impacted the whole world. Her voice will never die.

The selection of Greta Thunberg as my topic for my research paper connects to the course Gender Inequality and Intersectionality. Throughout this course I have learned that women have power. They are brilliant, courageous, influential, strong, and powerful. The list can go on and on. Women are often put down or pushed to the side. Society often views women as being less than men in a social hierarchy, but women have a strong voice and extremely important things to say. Greta Thunberg demonstrates that age and gender do not define a person. Having a disability or diagnosis such as Asperger’s does not limit the impact that an individual can have on the world. Thunberg is not male, she did not appear in a suit and tie, she did not hold a tremendous amount of wealth, yet she made an everlasting impact on the world. Thunberg defied social norms and encouraged others to do the same along the way. Throughout this course I also have learned that knowledge is power. Thunberg gave power to the people by enlightening them on the information she learned. Now that is a powerful woman.

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