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The millennial generation

Young, gifted and held back

The world's young are an oppressed minority. Unleash them

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IN THE world of “The Hunger Games” youngsters are forced to fight to the death for the amusement of their white-haired rulers. Today’s teen fiction is relentlessly dystopian, but the gap between fantasy and reality is often narrower than you might think. The older generation may not resort to outright murder but, as our special report this week on millennials describes (see [article](#)), in important ways they hold their juniors down.

Roughly a quarter of the world’s people—some 1.8 billion—have turned 15 but not yet reached 30. In many ways, they are the luckiest group of young adults ever to have existed. They are richer than any previous generation, and live in a world without smallpox or Mao Zedong. They are the best-educated generation ever—Haitians today spend longer in school than Italians did in 1960. Thanks to all that extra learning and to better nutrition, they are also more intelligent than their elders. If they are female or gay, they enjoy greater freedom in more countries than their predecessors would have thought possible. And they can look forward to improvements in technology that will, say, enable many of them to live well past 100. So what, exactly, are they complaining about?

These children that you spit on

Plenty. Just as, for the first time in history, the world's youngsters form a common culture, so they also share the same youthful grievances. Around the world, young people gripe that it is too hard to find a job and a place to live, and that the path to adulthood has grown longer and more complicated.

Many of their woes can be blamed on policies favouring the old over the young. Consider employment. In many countries, labour laws require firms to offer copious benefits and make it hard to lay workers off. That suits those with jobs, who tend to be older, but it makes firms reluctant to hire new staff. The losers are the young. In most regions they are at least twice as likely as their elders to be unemployed. The early years of any career are the worst time to be idle, because these are when the work habits of a lifetime become ingrained. Those unemployed in their 20s typically still feel the "scarring" effects of lower income, as well as unhappiness, in their 50s.

Housing, too, is often rigged against the young. Homeowners dominate the bodies that decide whether new houses may be built. They often say no, so as not to spoil the view and reduce the value of their own property. Over-regulation has doubled the cost of a typical home in Britain. Its effects are even worse in many of the big cities around the world where young people most want to live. Rents and home prices in such places have far outpaced incomes. The youngsters of Kuala Lumpur are known as the "homeless generation". Young American women are more likely to live with their parents or other relatives than at any time since the second world war.

Young people are often footloose. With the whole world to explore and nothing to tie them down, they move around more often than their elders. This makes them more productive, especially if they migrate from a poor country to a rich one. By one estimate, global GDP would double if people could move about freely. That is politically impossible—indeed, the mood in rich countries is turning against immigration. But it is striking that so many governments discourage not only cross-border migration but also the domestic sort. China's *hukou* system treats rural folk who move to cities as second-class citizens. India makes it hard for those who move from one state to another to obtain public services. A UN study found that 80% of countries had policies to reduce rural-urban migration, although much of human progress has come from people putting down their hoes and finding better jobs in the big smoke. All these barriers to free movement especially harm the young, because they most want to move.

The old have always subsidised their juniors. Within families, they still do. But many governments favour the old: an ever greater share of public spending goes on pensions

and health care for them. This is partly the natural result of societies ageing, but it is also because the elderly ensure that policies work in their favour. By one calculation, the net flow of resources (public plus private) is now from young to old in at least five countries, including Germany and Hungary. This is unprecedented and unjust—the old are much richer.

The young could do more to stand up for themselves. In America just over a fifth of 18- to 34-year-olds turned out to vote in the latest general election; three-fifths of over 65s did. It is the same in Indonesia and only slightly better in Japan. It is not enough for the young to sign online petitions. If they want governments to listen, they should vote.

However, the old have a part to play, too. The young are an oppressed minority—albeit an unusual one—in the straightforward sense that governments are systematically preventing them from reaching their potential.

That is a cruel waste of talent. Today's under-30s will one day dominate the labour force. If their skills are not developed, they will be less productive than they could be. Countries such as India that are counting on a demographic dividend from their large populations of young adults will find that it fails to materialise. Rich, ageing societies will find that, unless the youth of today can get a foot on the career ladder, tomorrow's pensioners will struggle. What is more, oppressing youngsters is dangerous. Countries with lots of jobless, disaffected young men tend to be more violent and unstable, as millions of refugees from the Middle East and Africa can attest.

They're quite aware of what they're going through

The remedy is easy to prescribe—and hard to enact. Governments should unleash the young by cutting the red tape that keeps them out of jobs, and curbing the power of property-owners to stop homes from being built. They should scrap restrictions on domestic migration and allow more cross-border movement. They should make education a priority.

It is a lot to expect from political leaders who often seem unequal to the task of even modest reform. But every parent and grandparent has a stake in this, too. If they put their shoulders to the wheel, who knows what they might accomplish.

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