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# AGENTS OF CHANGE

*We've all sat on the sofa and thought about changing the world, but what does it take to actually do it? Meet the women who went beyond armchair activism to make serious global waves ➤*

Words SALMA HAIDRANI



Breanne Butler co-organised the global Women's March in January 2017



**P**eople say a lot of stuff about our generation. That we're lazy. That we're pissing away our salaries on bottomless brunch. That we're vain, selfie-taking time wasters. But here's the thing: we are also shaping the world around us in a way that's not been seen since the '60s. Because now, anyone with a laptop, an idea and a complete inability to let sleeping fat cats lie can, theoretically, effect global change at the click of a button. But what makes the difference between a cause that gets 105 petition signatures and one that mobilises the world? We asked the women who did just that to tell us...



## THE WOMEN'S MARCH MOBILISER

**WHO:** Breanne Butler, 28.

**WHAT SHE DID:** Co-organised the Women's March, which took place on every continent in January 2017.

**WHAT SHE WAS:** A pastry chef.

**THE IDEA:** When Butler heard about Trump's presidency (in November 2016), she threw up. "I was just so upset," she says. "I ran off the train and joined three other women who were also being sick in a trash can. We just stood there afterwards, hugging each other and crying. I thought, 'What now? What can I do?'"

Logging into Facebook later that night, Butler stumbled on a post from her friend Bob Bland looking for help in setting up a protest march in Washington. They wanted to time the event for Trump's first week in office – meaning they had less than two months to organise it.

**HOW IT WENT GLOBAL:**

One word: Facebook. It meant Butler could quickly encourage strangers across the US to organise marches in their own states. She started that night and people began to respond

straight away. "I thought my notifications would break they were so overloaded. I was glued to my laptop for 26 hours just messaging," she says. In under 72 hours, Butler had mobilised every single state, appointing organisers for each one. She'd provide them with tips and resources where she could, and organisers worked with local police to

get permits to shut down streets. "In Washington, DC, we had a permit for 200,000 people, more than double that showed up!" Butler recalls. As each state has different laws, organisers had to research and work with the police accordingly.

She started receiving messages from London, Canada, Switzerland and Australia, and soon, 673 marches were set to take place – including one in Antarctica. But it wasn't just a case of sending out event invites. From there, Butler designed the logo for the marches and juggled her daily life with huge organisational tasks. "I cooked Thanksgiving dinner and was chopping vegetables while I was on a conference call with 200 people," Butler says, laughing. She wanted to get a feel for who the organisers were and ensure they were collaborating smoothly so they could relay the right information back to their teams.

The Women's March was the largest

day of protests ever recorded in the US, with more than one in 100 Americans marching, and a further three million across the world. As for what that historic day was like for Butler? Surreal: "As far as the eye could see, there was pink [page 98 has details] and people. It was incredible."

## THE LAW MAKER >

**WHO:** Asma Elbadawi, 27.

**WHAT SHE DID:** Got basketball's governing body, FIBA, to allow players to wear hijabs on the court.

**WHAT SHE WAS:** A student and spoken-word poet.

**THE IDEA:** It was July 2015, and Elbadawi wanted to play basketball. The problem: FIBA didn't allow headscarves.

"I never saw anyone playing in hijab. It made me believe that as a Muslim woman, it simply wasn't an option," she says. So what did she do? She went and teamed up with US basketball players Indira Kaljo and Bilqis Abdul-Qadir to launch the #FIBAAAllowHijab campaign, petitioning for FIBA to allow Muslim players to compete in their hijabs.

**HOW IT WENT GLOBAL:** She started small, and asked her local team, the Bradford Cobras, to share the campaign. But then she had to reach those who weren't as passionate about basketball. She began showing up to her poetry performances in basketball kit, so people would ask her about it. They did – including Channel 4 and BBC Sport – and after each performance, she'd tweet #FIBAAAllowHijab to @FIBA.

Once the petition had 130,000 signatures, the campaign drew further attention from the press and the hashtag went viral, with star players such as LeBron James on board. FIBA could no longer ignore the pressure, and a new ruling came into effect in October 2017. Elbadawi now plays for the Falcon All Stars, the first all-Muslim women's basketball team set up since the ban was lifted. As for playing professionally? For the first time, it's within her reach.



## THE FACE OF THE TAMPON TAX

**WHO:** Laura Coryton, 24

**WHAT SHE DID:**

Got the tampon tax abolished.

**WHAT SHE WAS:** A student.

**THE IDEA:** In May 2014, while ranting with a friend, Coryton discovered that tampons were taxed as a 'luxury, non-essential item'. Meanwhile, Jaffa Cakes, crocodile meat, and bingo were considered essential, so not taxed by the government at all. She had no idea that this was going on, and nor, she discovered, did many others.

**HOW IT WENT GLOBAL:** Step one: set up a petition on Change.org. Step two: get *everyone* to take notice, not just her own echo chamber. She also

knew she needed to go international, fast. *The Huffington Post* already had an engaged audience, and agreed to her writing a blog discussing the topic. Next, it was time get MPs on side, so Coryton – who worked on the campaign for two hours a day – contacted each person who'd signed the petition and encouraged them to take a two-pronged approach. "First write to your MP and ask them to raise the issue in Parliament," she told me. "Then send a letter to the European Parliament, asking them to tackle their role in upholding the laws."

While she concedes that "this took years [of writing and emailing] and wasn't easy", MPs Stella Creasy and Paula Sherriff backed the campaign, as did MEP Molly Scott Cato.

Then, after reaching almost 200,000 signatures in March 2015, Coryton organised her first protest, approaching her most loyal supporters and inviting them to march with her to Downing Street. Two hundred showed up, waving banners, with fake-blood-soaked knickers on their heads. As media attention grew, even Barack Obama gave his support. In January 2016, he said, "I think it's pretty sensible for women to work to get those taxes removed." Sure, he was referencing the tampon tax Stateside, but it had a ripple effect on Coryton's petition: 24,000 signatures in under 48 hours.

After almost three years of varied – but non-stop – campaigning, Coryton was invited, along with Molly Scott Cato, to the European Parliament where she gave a speech on why the taxation should be abolished.

It was the catalyst the campaign needed, and the tampon tax is due to be axed in April 2018. But Coryton hasn't stopped there. She's now organising The Homeless Period Project, with leading companies, such as P&G, donating sanitary products to homeless shelters and charities, including organisations helping refugees and vulnerable women.



## THE FGM REVOLUTIONARY

**WHO:** Arifa Nasim, 20.

**WHAT SHE DID:**

Launched her own nonprofit organisation, Educate2Eradicate (E2E).

**WHAT SHE WAS:** A student.

**THE IDEA:** After reading *Daughters Of Shame*, a book about women trapped in forced marriage, Nasim, then 14, realised that her school teachers had no clue how to recognise if someone was a victim of forced marriage, honour-based violence or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). And no charities were addressing this. Sure, they had victim support, but nothing focusing on education and prevention.

**HOW IT WENT**

**GLOBAL:** She spent four years talking to survivors, attending conferences and speaking to teachers to discover the gaps in their knowledge.

Then, a few days after her 18th birthday, she set up E2E, to deliver workshops for educators on how to recognise victims in their classrooms. She started with her own teachers, but word spread, and soon schools began to contact her. Since then, Nasim's trained around 600 frontline professionals in person, and taught a team of volunteers to continue this work, so she can carry on with her own studies (she's now a Persian and history undergraduate). She also campaigns to ensure people listen to victims. In January, Tory MP Nusrat Ghani called for a ban on the term 'honour killings' and for it to be conflated with domestic violence. However, E2E contested the bill – after speaking to survivors, they believed that merging the two would prevent police from spotting honour-based violence. Thanks to E2E, Parliament listened and withdrew the bill. >

"Even Barack Obama gave [the cause] his support"



## THE CREATIVE ACTIVIST

**WHO:** Krista Suh, 30.

**WHAT SHE DID:** Created the Pussyhat worn by nearly half a million women at the Women's Marches in January.

**WHAT SHE WAS:** A screenwriter.

**THE IDEA:** The 'Pussyhat Project' was born two days after the US election. America was in a state of shock. Marches were being organised, but Suh didn't want to just show up. "I thought I could march naked!" she laughs. But then reality sunk in: it was winter and it would be freezing. She'd just taken up knitting, and instead decided she would make a hat. "Then I imagined what a statement it would be if everyone wore the same one," she says. "So I texted two friends saying, 'I've come up with this amazing idea.'" Those women were Jayna Zweiman and Kat

Coyle, who she'd recently met on a crochet course. Coyle (the course teacher) designed the pattern – hot pink, with cat ears, a thinly veiled reference to Trump's 'pussy-grabbing' comments – while Suh and Zweiman worked on getting as many people to knit it as possible. Their aim? To get one million made for the Women's March, in just two months' time.

### HOW IT WENT GLOBAL:

First they created a 'manifesto' to share online, along with the pattern – pitching the idea as a 'sea of pink' to send a clear message to those who felt victimised by Trump that they weren't alone. Next they approached feminist groups and the crafting community, tagging them in related posts and visiting stores with the

pattern, telling anyone who stocked knitting materials about the project. They wanted it to be possible for anyone to have a hat, so even if you couldn't knit, you could go into a shop and find someone who could.

By the end of 2016, the pattern had been downloaded around 60,000 times. After the march, the hat made the cover of *Time* magazine, while the Design Museum in London named it one of 2017's best designs. Who knew knitting was the way to a revolution? ♦



### BEHIND THE SCENES

#### Salma Haidrani

"I was surprised by how bashful some of these women were about their success. It made me realise that we, as women, are conditioned to see our successes as something that happens to us by accident. It's time we own them, however small."

# ONES TO WATCH

These four women are set to make big waves this year



#### CHARLIE CRAGGS

Craggs uses her skills as a nail technician to educate people on what it's like to be a transgender woman.

She travels the country offering free manicures, allowing those who take part to ask her anything they like. "If they ask something offensive I can teach them, in a friendly way, that that's not what you say to a trans person." Find out more at [Nailtransphobia.com](http://Nailtransphobia.com)



#### GINA MARTIN

When Martin discovered a man had taken upskirt pictures of her, she assumed the police would

take action. Instead, they told her it wasn't illegal. She set up a petition to make 'upskirting' a sexual offence, and has debated the subject in Parliament, across major news channels, and is making a documentary on the subject. Support Martin at [Thepetitionsite.com](http://Thepetitionsite.com)



#### SHELLEY ZALIS

Zalis is the force behind The Female Quotient, a movement that aims to advance equality in the

workplace. Within this, she also founded the Girls' Lounge, a community of over 17,000 women working together on solutions for change. With new friends including Sheryl Sandberg and high-school girls in Rwanda, it's clear there is power in the pack. [Thegirlslounge.com](http://Thegirlslounge.com)



#### SAMANTHA RENKE

The actress (you'll have seen her on the Maltesers ads) has a brittle bone condition and is a full-

time wheelchair user. She campaigns for accessible homes, after fearing she would be made homeless. She also blogs regularly, breaking down stigmas to do with disability and dating. Our favourite? Her proclaiming, "Yes, I'm disabled. Yes, I still date hot guys." Go Sam. @samrenke