



## IMPACT AREAS

# 5 Pioneering Women Who are Changing the World

COIN Team

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These five amazing women changemakers can inspire us all to make positive change in our own lives and communities.

A college degree. An interview. A promotion. A bigger salary. A seat at the table.

Over the years, women have struggled for [Gender Equality](#), particularly access to education, professional opportunities, and equal pay. We've fought to be taken seriously, to live and work without harassment, and to have the freedom to pursue our full potential.

And we've seen some progress: We know now that when [women have access to resources](#), they tend to share their wealth, tackle social problems head on, and build a better world. We know that [when women lead](#), everyone succeeds.

At the same time, we also know that many of us are discouraged and feel like [we don't have the power to make a difference](#). But that's simply not true. We're all strong enough, and capable enough, to make positive change. If we don't know how or don't know what's possible, it can be helpful to find a role model to follow, someone to show us the way.

So, to inspire us all to take action, whether it's for [Gender Equality](#) or another cause near and dear to us, we've put together a list of five women who didn't wait for change, who knew they could *be* the change they wanted to see in the world.

Check out these five amazing women changemakers and use their example to inspire positive change in your own lives and communities.

# 1. Sonia Sotomayor

As a young Puerto Rican girl growing up in the Bronx, Sonia Sotomayor saw an episode of *Perry Mason* that showed how powerful judges can be. It made her think. Could she be a judge, too?

Indeed she could – and how. Sotomayor has been a trailblazer fighting for equal rights, justice, and gender equality throughout her entire career. A graduate of Yale Law School and former assistant district attorney in Manhattan, she is the third woman appointed to the Supreme Court and its first Latina Justice. Prior to the Supreme Court, she served on the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals and taught law at New York University and Columbia Law School. She's also been committed to pro bono legal work throughout her career, and served on the board of the New York Campaign Finance Board and the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Now that she's a Supreme Court Justice, she's using her platform to address Gender Equality.

“Women doing the same work still earn less than men ... Pay equality is one of the biggest issues our nation faces,” U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor said in 2018 during a Q&A at Brown University. “We still have to fight gender inequality. It still exists.”

She also encourages all of us to get involved in the causes we care about. “None of us can afford to be bystanders in life,” she said in a 2017 Aspen Institute interview. “If we give up hope, we have nothing left to live for. There's too much at stake for the people I love. For the community that is such an integral part of who I am. For the children who want to grow up and have the world I want and the future I imagine for them. My life is worth my effort, and so is yours.”

So, let's all think like Sotomayor: What future do we want to put in the effort for?

# 2. Tarana Burke

In 2006, a civil rights activist Tarana Burke listened to a young girl describe her experience of sexual abuse. “Me, too,” she replied, and a movement was born.

Burke, who is now is the senior director of [Girls for Gender Equity](#) in Brooklyn, saw the movement she founded grow into a worldwide phenomenon by 2017, as millions of people used the hashtag #metoo to share their stories of sexual harassment, abuse, and assault,

as well as their struggles to cope afterward. Most often, the world learned, our societies protect those who commit sexual violence, and don't support the survivors. With #metoo, Burke and fellow activists kicked off an international conversation about accountability, stopping sexual violence, and lifting the voices of those long unheard or not believed.

Burke has been especially passionate about downplaying the stories from those accused of sexual violence, who are often famous, and instead amplifying the voices and stories of survivors who, up to now, have not been in positions of power.

"If we don't shift our focus and actually look at the people saying, 'Me too,' then we are going to waste a really valuable opportunity to change the nature of how we think about sexual violence in this country," said Burke in an interview with [Variety](#). "Everyday people – queer, trans, disabled, men, and women – are living in the aftermath of a trauma that tried, at the very worst, to take away their humanity. This movement at its core is about the restoration of that humanity."

To start and build that restoration process, Burke has unveiled a three-part plan: a new website, [Metoomvmt.org](#), which offers resources and support services for survivors, leadership training for survivors to start their own support programs, and healing circles to serve those in need.

Thanks to Burke, many people who have been trying to tell their stories, and have others believe those stories, are finally being heard.

### 3. Greta Thunberg

Gender Equality isn't just about pay and opportunity. It's also about the stability of our world, particularly the effects of climate change.

The [UN reports](#) that 80% of people displaced by climate change are women, and that "women are more vulnerable to the effects of climate change than men—primarily as they constitute the majority of the world's poor and are more dependent for their livelihood on natural resources that are threatened by climate change. Furthermore, they face social, economic and political barriers that limit their coping capacity."

To address this imbalance, the 2015 Paris Agreement even made a special provision to assist women in dealing with climate change.

But for one young woman in particular, it still wasn't enough. In the summer of 2018, at just 15 years old, Greta Thunberg was fed up with world leaders and their inaction on climate change. Sweden had just had its hottest summer in more than 260 years, and she needed

to know: What type of planet would she and other young people like her inherit? Would there even be a livable planet left for younger generations? When would the Swedish government reduce carbon emissions to align with the Paris Agreement? Thunberg wanted answers and action.

So, she started protesting, cutting class to sit outside the Swedish Parliament, demanding leaders take climate change seriously and pass policies that would create real change.

“I’m doing this because nobody else is doing anything,” she told *The Guardian* last fall. “It is my moral responsibility to do what I can. I want the politicians to prioritize the climate question, focus on the climate, and treat it like a crisis.”

Her protest went viral, inspiring youth around the world, leading to a [global climate strike](#) this May where hundreds of thousands of students walked out of their classes to demand action. Thunberg is now 16, and shows no sign of slowing down. She gave a [TED Talk](#), [spoke at the World Economic Forum in Davos](#), and is active on [Twitter](#), keeping the climate action discussion going.

“There is still time to turn everything around,” Thunberg said in her Davos speech this past January. “We can still fix this. We still have everything in our own hands. ... Now is not the time for speaking politely or focusing on what we can or cannot say. Now is the time to speak clearly.”

Thunberg knows her voice is powerful and that there’s no time to waste. Your voice is powerful, too, and what’s important to you can’t wait. Now, be like Greta. Start speaking up.

## 4. The 2019 World Cup Champion U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team

OK, technically this is more than one woman, but they were such a strong unit that we couldn’t call out just one player. If you watched any of the U.S. Women’s National Soccer Team (USWNT) World Cup games this year, you may have heard chants of “*Equal pay! Equal pay!*” alongside “USA! USA!” after each goal and victory.

That’s because, in the months leading up to the World Cup, the USWNT team members, led by team captains Carli Lloyd, Alex Morgan, Megan Rapinoe, and Becky Sauerbrunn, knew they would soon have the eyes of the world on them, and didn’t want to let the opportunity pass them by. They had a global platform, and they were going to use it, loud and clear.

They knew they were paid less than the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team, despite having a much better record. They knew that FIFA, the international nonprofit that oversees soccer worldwide, often downplayed the accomplishments of women's teams, instead focusing on the men's. They knew women deserved more.

So, USWNT started taking action.

In March, [they sued U.S. Soccer](#) for gender discrimination, saying their current working conditions affect “not only their paychecks but also where they play and how often, how they train, the medical treatment and coaching they receive, and even how they travel to matches.” They called out U.S. Soccer and FIFA in every interview, frequently posted #equalpay and similar hashtags across social media, and took on the critics who tried to silence them.

Then, they backed up their fight with the goods: They dominated this year's World Cup tournament in France, electrifying fans around the world, and won a decisive 2-0 victory over Sweden in the final.

By the time they got to their victory parade in New York City, the world was on their side. The crowd roared the now-familiar “Equal pay!” chant to greet the victors, and the team even used [pages from their equal pay lawsuit to make the confetti for the parade](#).

And perhaps we'll soon see a fitting end to this fight: In early July, Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia [introduced legislation](#) that would block funding for the FIFA Men's World Cup (which the U.S. is scheduled to host in 2026) unless the U.S. Soccer Foundation steps up and provides equal pay for both men's and women's teams.

Want to support the USWNT in their fight? Call your representatives and tell them you support [Manchin's bill](#).

## 5. Malala Yousafzai

In October 2012, a Taliban gunman boarded the school bus that Malala Yousafzai was riding home.

“Who is Malala?” the masked man asked.

He identified her, then shot her in the head.

Yousafzai was 15 years old at the time. Her crime? Going to school, and speaking out for the rights of girls everywhere to get an education.

Education means power, choices, and independence. And when it comes to power and equality, there may be nothing more formidable or threatening than an educated girl.

Yousafzai survived, and her family had to flee Pakistan for the U.K. And after her recovery, she had a choice. “I could live a quiet life or I could make the most of this new life I had been given,” she wrote on the website of her nonprofit, [The Malala Fund](#), which works to educate girls in places where equal access to education has typically been denied. “I determined to continue my fight until every girl could go to school.”

And fight she has. Thanks to her tireless efforts to bring attention to the cause of educating girls worldwide, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. She was just 17 when she won, making her the youngest recipient ever.

This July, Yousafzai told [Vanity Fair](#) that her greatest achievement wasn't the Nobel Prize, but “changing the conversation about girls' secondary education.”

She is currently studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Oxford.

In that same *Vanity Fair* interview, when asked “when and where are you happiest?”, Yousafzai answered: “When I meet girls and see hope in their eyes despite all the difficulties they are facing.”

None of these women started out as changemakers, but they all had one quality in common: They knew their own power. Sonia Sotomayor watched a TV show and got inspired. Malala Yousafzai experienced horrific violence and came through more determined than ever. And for Tarana Burke, a conversation with a simple phrase made all the difference.

You don't need to do a lot to make a big impact. As Greta Thunberg shows, just getting started can start a movement. Lean on your friends, like the USWNT, and know you don't have to fight alone.

Whether you're moved by everyday experiences or extraordinary events, you have the power to be a changemaker, too.

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