

## **A Rediscovered Feminist Vision: Mary Wollstonecraft and Global Education for Girls and Women**

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**Abstract:** Currently, much controversy exists in the opinions of scholars on the future of feminist identity and agenda. The one thing, however, that thinkers agree upon is the need to clarify this vision in the hope for greater international women's advancement. In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft argued in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that men and women should be educated for the betterment of society; while feminist thought has expanded greatly since then the need still remains for equal educational opportunities for women all over the world.

This paper will argue that an option for strengthening women's concerns today is to return to its ideological roots as put forth by Mary Wollstonecraft. She wrote, "Truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice." The simple, yet strong power of the first feminist thinkers was in their clarity of focus: true equality in educational pursuit for all people. Therefore, a brief survey will be offered of Wollstonecraft's original arguments; current international concerns of equal education for girls and women; and suggestions on how rediscovering the first feminist arguments for education can contribute to advancing global women's issues today.

### **Introduction**

The search for a unified identity of the younger women's movement is no new topic of discussion. Early on in the New Millennium several young feminist scholars organized to begin planning a conference to raise questions on the future of the women's movement. In fact, this future was so uncertain that they acknowledged they were unsure of what questions even needed to be raised, but that someone must begin asking questions.<sup>1</sup> So, they began preliminary plans for a conference in which the main agenda was to decide on determining a theme for the future of feminism.

This type of struggle to identify and maintain focus in what is now more popularly called third wave feminism is not unique to this conference. Since the early suffragists began calling for equal rights for women to be educated and to vote, the exact identity of women's rights has had an ebb and flow over the centuries. Most scholars identify this fluidity with gender equality movements as coming in "waves."<sup>2</sup> The first wave began in the eighteenth century with women such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan B. Anthony, and Sojourner Truth calling for the right to education and to vote for women. The second wave emerged in the middle twentieth century in the United States with the leadership of Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. During this second wave, women's political rights were questioned again: the private becoming political as a theme

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<sup>1</sup> Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford, "Harvesting our Strengths: Third Wave Feminism and Women's Studies," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4 #2 (April 2003): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, eds., *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*, (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 2.

and a rallying point for the movement. However, the beginning and focus of the third wave is exactly the place of concern in this paper.

Some scholars today do not recognize this description of the three waves of feminism.<sup>3</sup> The question of the identity of the latest form of feminism is nuanced in reason and manifestation. Some thinkers attribute this to the reluctance of younger women today to identify themselves as feminist, while holding to the ideas of and enjoying the privileges of the women's movement. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, prominent third wave feminists, compare issues of the second wave of feminism with fluoride in the water. Feminism has become such a common part of Western thinking and identity that it is simply in the water, we scarcely notice its existence.<sup>4</sup>

There also are a variety of forms and names of newer types of feminisms. Eco-feminists exist for those primarily concerned with the environment.<sup>5</sup> Marxist feminists, Muslim feminists, Chicana feminists, and womanists are all various forms of feminism with unique concerns and strategies.<sup>6</sup> There also is the issue of feminists who hold diverse places in society. During the second wave, women who contributed to the formation of feminist thought were largely in the academy.<sup>7</sup> With third wave feminism, however, this is no longer the case. All young women, no matter their job or social status are encouraged to take action and live out their feminism through daily activism.

The quandary for these women, however, is the focus for their activism. Should they defend the rights of religious freedom; lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender sexuality; AIDS/HIV awareness; universal healthcare; abortion; access to education; and the list goes on and on.<sup>8</sup> Some have suggested that this plurality of issues and concerns for third wavers is related to the problems and concerns of mass culture today. Anxieties related to terrorism, natural disasters, technology, and globalization alone give rise to questions pertaining to individual identity as well

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: young women, feminism, and the future*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Morris, "Feminism: Not Just for Radicals," *Independent Women's Forum* (2004), [http://www.iwf.org/articles/article\\_detail.asp?ArticleID=692](http://www.iwf.org/articles/article_detail.asp?ArticleID=692).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gillis, Howie, and Munford, *Third Wave Feminism*, (New York: Macmillan, 2004), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta: young women, feminism, and the future* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 47.

as cultural identity. Therefore, the reasoning for the lack of identity and focus for third wave feminism is complex on many levels.

There is one concern that spans the three waves, however. It is the right to equal opportunities for education for girls and boys. When Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she formed her argument for education around the basic human right to learn and to think. Today, the right to equal education in developing countries is still one of the foremost needs of women.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of this paper is to explore the connection of Mary Wollstonecraft's original arguments for women's rights in the 1700s for clues to the identity for the women's movement today. It is the conviction of this writer that understanding the original intentions of first wave feminists will clarify many questions of identity for the third wave of feminism.

First, the major tenets of Wollstonecraft will be summarized. Then, concerns related to education for girls and women will be explored. This portion of the paper will consider ideas from scholars and research centers alongside examples of school projects in Africa and Asia. Finally, suggestions will be made as to how understanding and accepting the arguments of Wollstonecraft can help to centralize third wave feminism, strengthening its focus while also rediscovering its identity. Consideration of Wollstonecraft's ideas is first.

### **Mary Wollstonecraft: A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman***

Wollstonecraft began her treatise arguing for equal educational rights for men and women in the eighteenth century by stating that she is pleading for her entire sex and not for herself.<sup>10</sup> She wrote:

Contending for the rights of woman, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom

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<sup>9</sup> Allison Kasic, "Back to the Basics," *Independent Women's Forum* (2006), [http://www.iwf.org/articles/article\\_detail.asp?ArticleID=948](http://www.iwf.org/articles/article_detail.asp?ArticleID=948).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, (1792 repr., New York: Norton Library, 1967), 23.

strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good?<sup>11</sup>

Upon many saddening observations by Wollstonecraft of her culture and the moral decay of both men and women, she deduced that the major problem was lack of education. Therefore, she wrote her book arguing for more opportunities for women's education based on the idea that it would enhance both the morality and integrity of women, men, and all of society.

She believed that the basic reason that women were not contributing to society was because they did not know they were capable of possessing any role other than wife, mother, or love object. Again she wrote:

If indeed this be their destination, arguments may be drawn from reason: and thus augustly supported, the more understanding women acquire, the more they will be attached to their duty- comprehending it- for unless they comprehend it, unless their morals be fixed on the same immutable principles of that of man, no authority can make them discharge it in a virtuous manner.<sup>12</sup>

This portion of the paper will be devoted to considering Wollstonecraft's overall arguments for the education of girls and women and how they contribute to enhancing society as a whole.

In the introduction of her book, Wollstonecraft identified some of the behaviors of men and women that were deplorable in her opinion, "men, who considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers."<sup>13</sup> She followed this thought by stating that women actually chose to be the mistresses because of the attention and excitement of the interplay of the sexes. Wollstonecraft attributed this irrational choice to lack of proper understanding of the nature of women by both men and women.

She firmly placed her arguments on the need to consider women as rational creatures rather than men's play partners. She wrote, "I wish to persuade women to endeavor to acquire strength of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

weakness... and that those who are objects of pity will soon be objects of contempt.”<sup>14</sup> By arguing that women should be considered rational and moral agents, Wollstonecraft removed the reasoning for women’s education from false notions of the nature of women. If indeed they were human beings, then they should be able to explore their learning faculties. She directly connected this with the contributions women would make to society and to men particularly in the development of her thought.

#### The Rights and Involved Duties of Mankind Considered

Wollstonecraft began her arguments for equal educational opportunities of both men and women based on the fact of their creation or constitution as human beings. She wrote:

Consequently the perfection of our nature and capability of happiness, must be estimated by the degree of reason, virtue, and knowledge, that distinguish the individual, and direct the laws which bind society: and that from the exercise of reason, knowledge and virtue naturally flow, is equally undeniable, if mankind be viewed collectively.<sup>15</sup>

She argued that both men and women have the possibility of various degrees of reason, knowledge, and virtue. Therefore, they should both have equal opportunities to develop these faculties. Discussion next naturally led to a consideration of various inequalities in society and their origin. Wollstonecraft believed that the ultimate problem in each of these cases was the absence of education for the masses, including both men and women.<sup>16</sup>

#### The Prevailing Opinion of a Sexual Character Discussed

Wollstonecraft believed that both men and women were responsible for the lack of equal educational opportunity. Women, due to the pleasure of the attention of men, actually preferred being considered as objects rather than as rational beings. She stated:

Women are told from their infancy, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for at least twenty years of their lives.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

Therefore, Wollstonecraft believed that to rectify this notion was to reform all of education, both for boys and girls.

She consistently drew her reasoning back to the need for education based on the good of the individual, all of women and men, and ultimately all of society. She also believed that a proper education would produce a better society in the present as well as in the future.<sup>18</sup> For Wollstonecraft a proper education would be public, including both men and women, and would be focused on the present needs of society, development of character, and growth of the future society.

Wollstonecraft directly related the state of marriage and the family with the inappropriate education women were receiving in her day. She believed that the attention that women were encouraged to attract from men in their youth was based on frivolous, selfish desires.<sup>19</sup> She wrote, “Youth is the season for love in both sexes; but in those days of thoughtless enjoyment provision should be made for the more important years of life, when reflection takes place of sensation.”<sup>20</sup> The “more important years of life” were those that did not include attention based on appearance only, but on thought, reflection, and virtue. Wollstonecraft believed that to address these issues adequately, education must be available to both men and women; focused on equal development of the integrity of both mind and character of people. She wrote:

But I still insist, that not only virtue, but the knowledge of the two sexes should be the same in nature, if not in degree, and that women, considered not only as moral, but rational creatures ought to endeavor to acquire human virtues (or perfections) by the same means as men, instead of being educated like a fanciful kind of half being.<sup>21</sup>

### **Observations on the State of Degradation to which Woman is Reduced by Various Causes**

In this section Wollstonecraft offered a definition of reason on which she based the next portion of her vindication for women. She wrote, “Reason is, consequentially, the simple power of improvement; or more properly speaking, of discerning truth.” Therefore, all men and women should be able to participate in this endeavor of exploring truth, or improving oneself. Basically,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 75.

all people have this ability to think and question, therefore, their possibility for advancement is unknown without the availability of actually pursuing it. The changes and improvements of the society as a whole are dependent on the proper education of the individual, therefore, both sexes ought to be educated.

She addressed the popular thought of her day that women did not need to be educated because men would take care of them. First, with the idea that men were not necessarily doing this anyway, but also with the idea that they are not always able to do this.<sup>22</sup> Either way, women ought to have the opportunity to be educated because of their ability to think, not on the possibility of someone else thinking for them. She connected this problem again with the belief that women were created for the pleasure of the man and the woman's blind acceptance of this fact.<sup>23</sup>

Wollstonecraft believed that the impact on families was the ultimate in progress of the society if education was made available to both men and women. She believed that because proper education was based on appreciation for developing character, a mother would be better equipped to care for her family.<sup>24</sup> Education, in her view, creates people who learn to be concerned for their world and others in it. She wrote:

Yet women, whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or the natural selfishness of sensibility expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family; for by an undue stretch of power, they are always tyrannizing to support a superiority that only rests on the arbitrary distinction of fortune.<sup>25</sup>

Women who were only stable in society because of their relationship to a wealthy man would always be distracted by remaining in the man's good graces; therefore, taking away from her attention to her children. However, a woman who had learned to think and participate in society based on her own rational character could rest in her place in society as a viable contributor, and aid the development of the next generation of thinkers and leaders.

Wollstonecraft concluded this portion of her argument for the right of women to be educated with interesting perspective. She wrote, "I only contend that the men who have placed

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

in similar situations, have acquired a similar character- I speak of bodies of men, and that men of genius and talents have started out of a class, in which women have never yet been placed.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, Wollstonecraft argued that in the course of history men, great men, had arisen through the availability of education. What types of contributions could come from women who were given the same kinds of opportunity? Wollstonecraft challenged her 18<sup>th</sup> century readers to dream of the possible advancements and enhancements of society should women be given the same opportunities for growth and education as the great men of history had enjoyed. Here is the simple strength of Wollstonecraft’s arguments for the purposes of this paper. Because both men and women are rational creatures, the possibility of their contributions in developing countries are unheard of as of yet. Several recent studies of this nature would agree with Wollstonecraft’s eighteenth century ideas, to which attention will be given next in this paper.

### **Education for Girls and Women in Developing Countries**

At this juncture, the question turns from the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century, to the possibility of uniting her thoughts to the identity question of third wave feminism through concern for education of all women in the world. As has already been stated in this paper, there is no typical third wave feminist. The interests and concerns of younger women today vary from woman to woman. Hence, the focus of younger feminist agenda today is fragmented. However, what if there was something that could help unite the concern for many of the causes? What if something could at the very least give a springboard for addressing other concerns on the hearts and minds of young women today? One equity feminist wrote, “Women do not all need or want the same thing. To presume that women are a monolithic entity is to deny women across class, racial, and religious lines all have different interests- and it is incredibly condescending.”<sup>27</sup> So, what if there was something about addressing the need for better education for women and girls that could help to unite younger feminists and all women internationally? These questions are at the heart of the next section of this paper.

### **Studies on Education for Girls and Women in Developing Countries**

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>27</sup> Amanda Morris, “Feminism: Not Just for Radicals,” *Independent Women’s Forum* (2004), [http://www.iwf.org/articles/article\\_detail.asp?ArticleID=692](http://www.iwf.org/articles/article_detail.asp?ArticleID=692).

“While some progress has been made on girls’ education, girls are still largely out of school compared to boys. Today, some 115 million children worldwide are not enrolled in school, of which 60 million are girls. In Africa, only 1 in 5 girls attend secondary school.”<sup>28</sup> In the past forty years much progress has been made for the availability and accessibility of education for girls and women in developing countries. However, a great distance remains in this journey. Sociologists, educators, and economists all agree that education for women is highly beneficial for the individual, family, and entire society. Yet, basic challenges continue to prevent many girls from receiving their education. Laurence Summers, former Vice President of World Bank, wrote, “Recent research and concrete calculations show that educating females yields far reaching benefits for girls and women themselves; their families, and societies where they live.”<sup>29</sup> Wollstonecraft herself would agree with these scholars in her idea that the entire society is enhanced through the education of women. She, along with other more recent thinkers, have put forth many benefits of women’s education.

The benefits themselves are numerous and varied in nature. Several of these are presented here for consideration of support for this great need. First, a direct link between the education of women and decreased poverty in developing countries has been established. Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM stated, “The costs of gender inequality are far too high to ignore. By not addressing gender inequality, we are regenerating poverty.”<sup>30</sup> More often than not, it is gender inequality that prevents women and girls from receiving education. Oxfam, a research institute established to address the needs of girls and women education, published this statement, “Oxfam is concerned about gender inequality because the majority of the world’s poor are women: around 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people who live in extreme poverty, on less than one dollar a day, are women and girls. Gender discrimination, or the denial of women’s basic human rights, is also a major cause of poverty.”<sup>31</sup> Also, the Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF stated, “We know that progress in girls’ education is fundamental to the achievement and

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<sup>28</sup> UNGEI Press Release, (March 9, 2005), [http://www.ungei.org/news/index\\_270.html](http://www.ungei.org/news/index_270.html) (accessed June 8, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Laurence Summers, Foreword to *Women’s Education in Developing Countries*, ed. Elizabeth King and M. Anne Hill (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press).

<sup>30</sup> UNIFEM Press Release, (May 10, 2005), [http://www.unifem.org/news\\_events/currents/documents/IFAD\\_UNIFEM\\_conference.pdf](http://www.unifem.org/news_events/currents/documents/IFAD_UNIFEM_conference.pdf) (Accessed June 7, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Introduction to Oxfam, [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/issues/gender/introduction.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/gender/introduction.htm) (Accessed June 8, 2007).

sustainability of poverty reduction.”<sup>32</sup> By addressing educational availability for both boys and girls in developing countries, the rate of poverty decreases.

Another beneficial effect of women’s education is increased micro and macro economic independence. In countries where women are allowed access to education, studies show that economies are stronger.<sup>33</sup> Often it is believed this is true because when women have access to education and productivity, they provide better for themselves and for their family.<sup>34</sup> Again, this idea reiterates Wollstonecraft’s thought when she said that women would provide better for their children and families when they are educated.<sup>35</sup> Other studies show that women are also more likely to own land, vote, and learn to read, all activities that promote better independence for the individual and the state’s economy.<sup>36</sup> Evidently, when women are encouraged to broaden their understanding and skills they contribute back to their children, families, and society.

Other areas of society are affected as well when woman are allowed access to education. Life expectancy, infant/child mortality, and fertility rates are advantageously affected when women are allowed to learn.<sup>37</sup> A country’s entire well being seems to be fortified when women become active participants in it through educational pursuit. As they learn to think and grow it appears that women also learn to care for themselves, their families, and their peers in ways that better the living standards of everyone. Life expectancy grows through knowledge of health and nutrition. Babies and children are cared for in a more hygienic way, and women are less likely to give birth at ages or in circumstances that are less than desirable for reproduction. All of these effects take place where women are allowed to learn and grow as people.

Also interesting to notice is the likelihood that a mother’s education will enhance and encourage the pursuit of her children’s education. When mothers receive education not only does it better the environment of her children through decreased mortality rates and greater life

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<sup>32</sup> UNGEI Press Release, March 9, 2005, [http://www.ungei.org/news/index\\_270.html](http://www.ungei.org/news/index_270.html). (Accessed June 8, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> CE Shen and John B. Williamson, “Child Mortality, Women’s Status, Economic Dependency, and State Strength: A Cross National Study of Less Developed Countries,” *Social Forces* 76 (December 1997), 678.

<sup>34</sup> Laurence Summers, foreword to *Women’s Education in Developing Countries*, ed. Elizabeth King and Anne Hill (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), vii.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), 79.

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth King and M. Anne Hill, *Women’s Education in Developing Countries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), 29.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

expectancy, but she also develops an appreciation for her children learning.<sup>38</sup> This is especially true for the daughters of educated mothers. As women learn and grow they see the value of it for their daughters, thus encouraging and helping them in their education. Wollstonecraft, in the late 1700s, also emphasized this impact of the availability of education for women. She saw that women who learn today will encourage the education of future generations. Therefore, in recent studies and in the thought of Mary Wollstonecraft from the eighteenth century, not only does education for women in developing countries positively impact the society as they learn, it also promises to be advantageous for women in the future.

Some scholars have also argued that women's education in poorer communities so builds the character and hope of it that less opportunities for terrorist involvement occur. One thinker wrote, "As a result, the weak support for women's human rights and poor livelihoods increases the susceptibility of these communities to becoming breeding grounds for terrorists. Developing the infrastructure and providing education for economic expansion will prevent our enemies from using rural neighborhoods as a safe haven."<sup>39</sup> Because women are often left alone during times of war while men fight or migrate to places required by their government, women's involvement in the betterment of their society is crucial. Again, when women are educated they are better able to help defend and protect their families and children during times of peace and war.

Perhaps the most pressing need for better educational opportunities for women and girls in developing countries is the direct impact that their education seems to have on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention. Several studies show that where women are allowed to be educated formally the rate of HIV/AIDS decreases. Levels of education for both boys and girls are strong predictors for the occurrence of safe behaviors regarding HIV infection.<sup>40</sup> Gender inequality in particular negatively affects the HIV/AIDS pandemic because "[it contributes] to the social conditions that facilitate the spread of the HIV virus."<sup>41</sup>

This fact is especially true for girls because the consequences of life with HIV/AIDS has a unique impact on them. Women and girls are more likely to be the caretakers of those infected

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>39</sup> Lida Noory, "International Women's Day," March 3, 2006, [http://www.iwf.org/articles/article\\_detail.asp?ArticleID=867](http://www.iwf.org/articles/article_detail.asp?ArticleID=867). (Accessed January 9, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> *Gender Equality and Adult Basic Education*, Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB, December 2005, 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Beyond Access for Girls and Boys*, Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, December 2005, 4.

with HIV. They are also the victims of sexual abuse and rape which causes them to be more likely to contract the virus. Therefore, in countries where HIV/AIDS is at pandemic proportions, education for girls and women is especially crucial and beneficial. The social as well as the physical needs of women and girls are too important not to address these issues through education.

The United Nations has adopted an agreement for several target areas to be addressed and attained by the year 2015 called the Millenium Development Goals. One of these goals specifically addressing equal education states the need to, “[a]chieve universal primary education.” However, several of the other seven goals are directly impacted by educational opportunities for girls and women. Specifically, these are: promoting gender equality and empowering women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.<sup>42</sup> The road to addressing and attaining equal educational opportunities for girls and women is challenging. While many benefits can be seen and proven, the actual realization of this feat has many roadblocks due to perceived relevance and helpfulness of education in developing countries. Therefore, it is the thesis of this paper that uniting third wave feminists behind this common goal can both reinvigorate a more harmonious identity for the younger women’s movement today; and fortify the needs of women in developing countries throughout the world. Several suggestions for involvement are considered in the final portion of this paper.

### **Third Wave Involvement**

Possible opportunities for involvement of younger feminists today can take several forms. Since the education of girls and women in developing countries addresses many of the varied interests of third wave feminists, uniting around this central aim can lend strength to the movement in general. In a statement by UNICEF’s executive director Ann V. Veneman on International Women’s Day 2006, credit was given to the work and labor of Betty Friedan, mother of the second wave of feminism. Veneman reminded her audience that Friedan led the way in bringing about much progress for women in the West. She stated, “Each of us here today

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<sup>42</sup> Rajeswary Iruthayanathan, *Millenium Development Goals: Promoting the Possible*, Choices September 2003, 28.

is an inheritor of decades of progress and opportunities.”<sup>43</sup> In a related thought on the indebtedness and responsibility of younger generations, Nelson Mandela asked, “Will our legacy be more than a series of broken promises?”<sup>44</sup> If an attempt to continue the advances gained by our mothers and grandmothers is to be attained, it will be through the needs of women internationally, not those centered in the West alone. Considering possible points of action is next in this paper.

The most obvious area of involvement is the work to attain the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations. Work done by and through related organizations continues to address these needs for developing countries. Specifically, since the issue is not really whether the goals are needed, but the forms in which the goals will be attained, younger women today can join the work to address the needs of developing countries. In a paper addressing girls’ education in South Asia produced by Oxfam, suggestions for civil society and non-governmental agencies included keeping gender on the agendas of governments and campaigning for strong gender equality policy.<sup>45</sup> It was also suggested that these types of organizations could “document good innovative practices that improve gender equality in education for dissemination and advocacy.”<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, third wave involvement can aid the education of girls and women in developing countries through bringing greater visibility to this need of women around the world. Specifically because one of the characteristics of third wave interest is involvement and critique of popular culture, what if younger women today could contribute to raising awareness for women in developing cultures through the influence of popular culture in the West?

One such organization bringing attention to needs of women in developing countries is the V-Day organization established by popular author Eve Ensler. Through her own journey toward healing due to injustices and abuse during childhood, Ensler found that the needs of women transcend culture and race. Therefore, she uses her fame and influence to highlight the needs of women around the world through education and fundraising events. Ensler’s website alone gives several pages of important information on the status of women as well as the needs

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<sup>43</sup> UNICEF Press Release, Statement of UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2006 (Accessed on June 22, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Jan Vandemoortele, “Are the Millennium Development Goals Feasible?” *Choices* (September 2002), 8.

<sup>45</sup> *Girls’ Education in South Asia*, Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB. February 2006, 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

and definitions of violence against women throughout the world. Through the pain of her experience, Ensler is seeking to address the pain of women around the world, not only in the West. Therefore, she is uniting both the influence of her popular appeal with her concern for women. What if other younger women today could unite their interests to do the same? What if advocacy for developing countries were a greater concern for younger women through knowledge and involvement of third wave participation? Perhaps by connecting both the needs of women internationally with a unified identity for third wave feminism the existence of both is possible.

Another way for younger women to contribute to the needs of women throughout the world is through knowledge and participation in international policy. Women today should be educated about the needs of all women in developing countries. In this age of technology, there is no good excuse for younger women not knowing the needs of women in developing countries. Third wave agenda can aid the establishment of better knowledge through participation in governmental and non-governmental agencies of the United Nations. They also can enhance education of the needs through media in the West. If more women were concerned with the real needs of developing countries and less concerned with the ease and comfort of their own lives in the West, perhaps much could be attained for women all over the world. One such organization that exists within the African community is the Forum for African Women Educationalists.<sup>47</sup> This forum exists to bring together educated women from several Sub-Saharan African nations to discuss and fortify equal education for women. While this organization is uniquely made up of African women, perhaps partnerships with third wave agencies in the West could also help their strategy and agenda. At a minimum, knowledge of such forums is helpful in realizing universal education for girls and women. “Building public awareness and consensus on the social and economic advantages of girls’ education through advocacy” is a specific stated goal of this forum. Involvement by younger women today to bring about this public awareness in the West is attainable.

A third possibility for third wave involvement is strengthening the political will and sustainability of education for girls and women. Both of these ideas are keys to actually attaining universal education. Since it has been generally accepted that gender equality in education is

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<sup>47</sup> Forum for African Women Educationalists. <http://www.fawe.org/home/index/asp> (Accessed June 22, 2007).

important, what lies in the way of its attainment? Many scholars agree that it is this idea of political will and sustainability. In other words, a state must be convinced both in theory and in actuality that equal education is helpful and important for the well being of its society. Otherwise, too many issues come in between the idea of equal education and the practical outworking of it. It is going to take leaders and citizens who are able to stay the course of developing and implementing equal education for all. Third wave feminists today can come alongside developing countries by fortifying relationships of accountability.<sup>48</sup> These relationships can serve as bridges from where education is now to insuring the future of equal education by reminding leaders and policy makers of the benefits of education for all. They can also serve to buttress responsibility when other needs seem more imminent by consistently reminding government of the long term effects of better education. While equal education does not always seem as important as other needs of developing countries, it is nonetheless tied to the enduring relief of many of their chronic problems. Therefore, third wave feminists can exist as catalytic partners through encouragement in the political will and sustainability of universal education.

In her statement to the Oslo Donors' Conference on Sudan, Executive Director of UNIFEM Noeleen Heyzer stated, "Support of women cannot wait."<sup>49</sup> At the very least, younger women today can recognize the intense needs of women internationally. Living in the advances and opportunities afforded through the effort of women during the second wave of the women's movement, young women in the West can and should attempt to unite to make a difference. Understanding the frustrations, dangers, and disadvantages of women not afforded an education is important for all humanity in the twenty-first century. However, particularly for those concerned about the momentum of the women's movement today this need cannot go unacknowledged. Support of women cannot wait. In their book entitled *Global Woman*, authors Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild state, "The globalization of women's traditional role poses important challenges to anyone concerned about gender and economic

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<sup>48</sup> *Making It Happen*, Education and Gender Equality Series, Programme Insights, Oxfam GB. December 2005, 4.

<sup>49</sup> UNIFEM Press Release. Statement Delivered by Noeleen Heyzer, Executive Director of UNIFEM, to the Oslo Donors' Conference on Sudan, April 12, 2005  
[http://www.unifem.org/news\\_events/story\\_detail.php?StoryID=219](http://www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=219) (Accessed June 7, 2007).

inequity.”<sup>50</sup> Today this means at the very minimum support of women in developing countries who do not even have accessibility of primary education.

## Conclusion

The history of the women’s movement is the story of women advancing and growing in the face of inequality and injustice. Education has always been a part of that identity. In younger Western feminism today, questions of identity challenge the future progress of the women’s movement. However, this paper has sought to call for a remembering of the original intentions of Mary Wollstonecraft, proponent of equal national education in the late eighteenth century. Her pleas for education in Victorian society over two hundred years ago echo the needs of women in developing countries today. What if her clear, simple argument which began the movement for women so long ago could now reinvigorate and redefine the movement for women today? The needs of women in the world are still great. While questions of identity and agenda exist for Western feminists, is it not also appropriate to consider the needs and concerns of all women internationally? Ehrenreich and Hochschild stated, “Before we can hope to find activists solutions, we need to see women as full human beings. They are strivers as well as victims, wives and mothers as well as workers- sisters, in other words, with whom we in the First World may someday define a common agenda.”<sup>51</sup> The time for considering and defining this collaborative agenda is now, for the good of all women in the world.

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<sup>50</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild, eds. *Global Woman* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 13.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

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