

GENDER EQUITY AND THE RISE OF UNIVERSAL PUBLIC EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

As a general proposition, the more ignorant and backward a people, a tribe, or a nation, the more likely that discrimination will be manifested between and among various groups within that society. Literacy may not eradicate meanness and the primitive urges of selfish genes, but it does have the potential for creating awareness and sensitivity to issues that are closed to those who are denied the ability to gain knowledge and communicate with others. The most prevalent and obvious sources of discrimination are economic, racial, religious and ethnic. Yet, even more pervasive are the subtle and debilitating gender discriminations levied against half of the human race. Throughout history, regardless of era, societies marked by low literacy have been possessed of the most blatant discriminatory practices. In this article I assert that there is a definitive historical cause and effect relationship between the creation and progress of public universal mass education and the advancement of gender equity. In fact, we maintain that an efficient system of public schools is a precursor and a condition precedent for enhancement of human rights generally, and for women's rights in particular. Proofs are generously spread throughout the history of development of governments of western democracies since the Enlightenment, with France, Germany, England and the United States in the forefront.

Societies with low literacy rates have high levels of prejudice against women and racial minorities and are usually coupled with low standards of living, religious fundamentalism and intolerance. Low literacy rates permit customs and traditions to go unexamined and ill-considered, perpetuating myths and revelations conjured to enhance the power and authority of the dominant groups in any society. Such dominant groups are, by their very nature, dependent upon the limitations and the filtering away of information that could have fostered reevaluation of cultural and social norms. For this reason, universal mass education has always been an anathema to those in authority who control by power, social convention and cultural convention. As nations have sought to create systems of universal education, new awareness of discriminatory customs and practices has been more frequently exposed to practical scrutiny and reality. Today, nations that are more educationally advanced, the OECD countries, have laws in place that reflect a more mature and learned view of prejudice and discrimination. The European Convention on Human Rights, the U.S. Constitution, and various United Nations protocols give evidence of reflection of more advanced thinking toward the social and

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human condition of mankind. Where gender equity has advanced, there has been the precursor of broader education and a foundation of a more knowledgeable people.

THE ADVENT OF REASON

The fact that most of the western moral philosophers and theologians did not clearly condemn sex discrimination must be, to a large measure, attributed to a lack of moral reasoning that emanates from a regime of sexual inequality promoted by social convention translated into governmental policy. The failure to develop the knowledge and potential of humanity over the millennium has not only visited untold misery and denied happiness to multitudes; it has cost nations and states the potential for economic development and it has generally reduced the standard of living of human beings, depending on the intensity of the discrimination and deprivation worldwide. This dilemma has not, of course, gone unnoticed over the centuries, but such concerns, have not been accompanied by a dedication of purpose and a will of governments to provide a remedy. Moral philosophers who have seriously thought about the issue have condemned discrimination against women, yet individuals and governments have not generally followed the moral sentiments with sufficient conviction to provide comprehensive remedies.

Most notably, the utilitarians who have espoused the doctrine of happiness have understood and addressed this pervasive problem of inequality (Herman, 2001, p.79-80). Hutcheson and others' advocacy of human rights as universal givens did not accept the legal subjection of women and did not recognize any distinction of rights based on gender (Herman, 2001).¹ The Enlightenment in general examined the customs and the laws that had imposed discrimination by religious class, economics, sex and ethnicity for a thousand years, and the Enlightenment did sensitize much of society for the first time to serious thoughts of universal freedoms beyond the strictures and barriers imposed by custom, social hierarchy and ecclesiastical law. The idea that governments were formed in a kind of social contract in which all people had free will and rights, and that they invested governments with a delegation of their rights for the general good was not necessarily new, but the idea gained momentum and was fueled by both the French and American revolutions.

Very little definitive progress toward the elevation of the status of women could be discerned during the 17th and 18th centuries. Women were largely cloistered in homes or convents in France, England and the rest of Europe. The conditions in the colonies were similar, except the rigid European class system was not as apparent in the American frontier. Even though the colonies were not as class oriented as the older European societies, there existed high rates of illiteracy that fed pervasive sexual, economic, and racial discrimination. According to Charles Beard, American society was marked by discrimination and disfranchisement of women, indentured servants, poor propertyless classes, and of course, slaves. Women were not represented in

Philadelphia in 1776, when the Declaration of Independence was considered, nor were they involved in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 (Beard, 1986, p.24). Colonies, and later the states, had wide-ranging laws that principally protected white males, property owners, and paid little attention to education of women. Not only were women denied education and disfranchised, they were, along with children, exploited during the industrial revolution, which found them to be available, submissive and cheap laborers. Beard notes that women and children made up four-sevenths of the workforce of cotton manufacturers of Great Britain (Beard, 1986, p.26), and he quotes Alexander Hamilton who observed, "The husbandman himself experiences a new source of profit and support from the increased industry of his wife and daughters, invited and stimulated by the demands of the neighboring manufactories" (Beard, 1986, p.26). Thus, even though they were not privileged to vote, to obtain education or to benefit from manifold laws designed by men to hold and perpetuate ownership of property, women and their children were eagerly sought after as low-paid laborers in the dark "satanic mills" of the industrial revolution.

It was in this context that Abigail Adams wrote on March 31, 1776, to her husband John in Philadelphia imploring him to consider the plight of women and to give some recognition to their rights. Abigail wrote:

I long to hear that you have declared an independency - and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. . . . Remember all men would be tyrants if they could (Levin, 1987, p.82).

John, although a man of the Enlightenment, gently dismissed Abigail's wishes, as was the propensity of most other leaders who were reformers of this great era in the history of western political movements.

Brian Silver has pointed out that one of the great limitations of the Enlightenment is that it did little to advance the rights of women (Silver, 1998, p.76). While radical leaders of the Enlightenment in France believed in universal education for women and men, advances to provide state education were quickly nullified by the Catholic Church and conditions that would have measurably advanced the education of women retrogressed and did not come to fruition until the Ferry laws one hundred years later that finally established public schools in France. D'Holbach, one of the most radical thinkers of the Enlightenment, was uncharacteristically mired in the custom and culture, believing that "women's weaker organs" militated against their attaining genius (Silver, 1998, p.76). Even the great Kant, of the German Enlightenment, who so perceptibly dissected the philosophy of mankind, was unaccountably nearsighted when dealing with the woman question. Kant took the curious position that women were passive citizens, not active ones; passive because women in general owed their preservation to men, who fed and protected them.

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Women and domestic servants, as passive citizens, were not independent and lacked civic personality, and therefore should not be given the right to vote. This two-level civic personality conveniently relegated women and the poor to a sub-citizen level when it came to voting rights. However, Kant did not extend this obtuse reasoning to general conditions of freedom -- liberty and equality before the law (Gregor, 1993, p.126).

SEEDS OF EQUALITY

Diderot, to his credit, understood that women's "inferiority" resulted from the historical dominance of men, yet he did little to address the issue. The greatest of all the Enlightenment philosophers, Rousseau sought to extend public education to women equally with men, but basically believed that women had little originality in their thinking and should largely devote themselves to pleasing men (Gregor, 1993, p.126). Actually, Rousseau, the man of reason who so profoundly influenced the French Revolution, viewed women's rights in an even more limited way, for he did not give credence to equality of women in either conjugal or political spheres of society. In his *Discourse on Political Economy* (Ritter, 1988, pp.59-60) published in 1755, Rousseau clearly relegates women to lower rungs on both the private and political ladders. Where Hobbes and Locke acknowledged equality between women and men in private, family, and conjugal life, Rousseau felt that "it is the father who should be in command..." and "...the authority between the father and the mother should not be equal." In this regard, Rousseau, famously said "the husband should have the right to oversee the conduct of his wife..." (Ritter, 1988, pp.59-60). One would probably have expected more of Rousseau, who was preeminently the great egalitarian and defender of public education, but he too was severely limited by law, custom and culture, even though he generally rebelled against them.²

As Silver observes, it was not only Rousseau who let women down but, similarly Madison, Jefferson, and Washington were of little help. Yet there were some in this firmament of great Enlightenment intellectuals who were able to objectively view the condition of women relative to men, and to transcend the culture and norms of the times. Of this group, Condorcet was the most passionate. Condorcet held revolutionary views on the rights of women and education, perhaps partially because of his beloved daughter (McLean and Hewitt, eds., 1994, 58). Condorcet's proposed *Declaration of Rights* (1789) was more extensive than the final *Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789) which, unlike the *United States Bill of Rights* (1791), did have a provision for equality. Condorcet's proposal draft of the *Declaration of Rights* (1789) succinctly states, "All citizens without distinction have an equal share of citizenship rights,"³ "the legislature will ensure that it establishes a total equality between citizens of all classes and sexes..." (and Hewitt, eds McLean., 1994, pp.57, 286) and further, "the law may not sanction any authority in a husband or parent which deprives women, or children over 16 years of age, of any of the rights of natural freedom" (Condorcet's *Declaration of the Rights*,

cited in McLean & Hewitt, eds., p.286). This language clearly reflects a more aggressive philosophy of equality than was included in the Constitution of the United States until after the Civil War when the Fourteenth Amendment was enacted in 1868.

The turmoil of the French Revolution and the rise of Robespierre ultimately resulted in Condorcet's death in 1794; however, before his tragic end he took a run at revising the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789) by proposing a *Declaration of the Natural, Civil and Political Rights of Man* in 1792 (McLean and Hewitt, eds., 1994, pp.280-283). In this "Plan" for a new Declaration, he again sought full equality between women and men in new language which simply stated that "Equality means that everyone enjoys the same rights," (McLean and Hewitt, eds., 1994, pp.280-283) and "The Law must be equal for everyone" (McLean and Hewitt, eds., 1994 pp.281). Finally and importantly, the Declaration proposed not only to guarantee equal educational opportunity for women, but also to establish equal education as a fundamental constitutional principle – an end that has not, even now, been established under the United States Constitution. His words were: "Every citizen needs education, and society owes an equal education to all its members" (McLean and Hewitt, eds., 1994, p.282). Condorcet's progressive view of the rights of women and education had helped fire an impulse for equity that, while not strong, was nevertheless to become a consistent and pervasive influence on politics.

ECONOMIC NECESSITY AND GENDER EQUITY

During the Enlightenment, little support was formally generated in England for gender equality, except by a few, including Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Paine, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft helped create a new sensitivity for equity with her famous tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Zinn, 2003), published in America shortly after the American Revolution. However, the idea of equality that primarily emanated from France was rigidly opposed by mainstream conservatism as represented by Edmund Burke who had written in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 1790, that "a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order" (Zinn, 2003, 211).

Jeremy Bentham in his *The Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 1781 (Bentham, 1988), connected moral reasoning to the practicality of legislation. Legislation must respond to moral impulse and morality required translation in legislation if it was to be meaningful in the formation of governments. Reason, according to Bentham, set forth education as the primary means to nurture sensibilities that would undermine crass and primitive urges to discriminate (Bentham, 1988, p.xvi). Through education, the development of intellectual and moral understanding, the "quantity and quality" of an individual's "moral, religious, sympathetic and antipathetic" sensibilities are affected (Bentham, 1988, p.61). Thus, logically, the sharpening of sensibilities would lead to the delineation of appropriate differences in gender and expose the inappropriate in civil government and society (Bentham, 1988, p.59). It was on Bentham that

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John Stuart Mill would later rely on his rationale for liberalism, just government and the rights of women.

The economic necessity of women to work in the mills alongside children pulled them out of the home and the domestic sphere thereby eroding the husband's domination. This, coupled with the mounting influence of education and economics, probably had more to do with the progress of women's rights than did any particular political philosophy. Economics broke down the "cubicle of home" and increasingly created "tensions in the dominant male world" (Zinn, 2003, p.112). The spark of women's awareness created by the rising education egalitarianism in concert with the economics of the workplace imbued women of the early 1800's with a new perspective that led custom and practice to begin to slowly change course. Increasingly, as males became more aware of the rending of the social fabric that kept women in the home, they asserted new pressure to retain their dominance. The idea of "the woman's place" became more of an issue with men and was ironically "accepted by many women" (Zinn, 2003, p.112). The Protestant churches of England and the United States and the Catholic Church of France did their best to retain and reassert male dominance through the sanctification of home and family life. "Religion," it was said, "is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence on the mole." (Zinn, 2003, p.112).⁴

While the Enlightenment philosophy did not directly redress the pervasive historical discrimination of women in the western world, the indirect influences had profound effect on the future progress of women. These concomitant influences that were the legacies of the Enlightenment encompassed three essential ideas: (a) Reason, (b) Equality, and (c) Separation of church and education.

The idea of reason--that human beings, by development of their intellect could better their earthly condition was the principal contribution of the Enlightenment. If citizens were enlightened, they would be more reasonable in making decisions regarding the public good (Furet, 1998, p.193). That which is in the interest of the public or common good serves everyone, both women and men. The pursuit of reason required and emphasis on the education of all the citizenry, and schools became the mechanism for "regenerating citizens" (Furet, 1998, p.193) and investing them with the capabilities to make rational choices about their government. Public schools were "indispensable to the foundation of the Republic" (Furet, 1998, p.193). The Church schools of the old regime were not intended to transform or improve society, or to lift the mass of people out of the conditions in which they had been condemned for centuries (Woloch, 1994). On the contrary, Church schooling was designed to maintain and solidify the social order already in place at the time. Under the Church schools of the old regime, just before the French Revolution only 27 percent of the brides could even sign their names, much less read or write (Ublock, 1994, p.174). Historians who studied the era concluded that if one defines literacy as the ability to read at a very elementary and minimal level, but not necessarily to

be able to write, only about 37 percent of the French population in 170 was literate (Woloch, 1994, p.174). This estimate was probably high, because Mulhall reported that in 1830 France, the literacy rate among adults was only 36 percent (Mulhall, 1980, p.89).⁵

In England the Marriage Act of 1753 required that brides and grooms sign their names or make their marks in a marriage register (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.193). Being able to merely write one's name is not a high standard of literacy, in fact it is hardly a standard at all, but even by this minimal measure in 1760 in England only 64 percent of the men and 39 percent of the women could sign their names (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p. 193). This miserable performance was the product of private and church education of the era (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.193). Although England was a laggard in the creation of common schools (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.314), the availability of cheaper books, libraries, and newspapers had an effect on the rate of literacy, and though the common woman and man did not have access to free schools, there did develop an increase in the literacy rates in England, whereby by 1840, between 43 and 54 percent of the brides could actually sign a marriage register (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.259). Such statistics were nebulous at best, and were hardly reliable, but later estimates that were based on census data showed that illiteracy rates were always higher among women than among men.

In the United States, "Blacks and Indians were kept from literacy, and women were assumed not to need it" (Cremin, 1980, p.492). By 1790, in both France and the United States the Enlightenment had introduced the necessity of universal education, a view that was ultimately espoused on both sides of the Atlantic. "The revolutionaries came to regard universal primary schooling as the hallmark of a progressive nation..." (Woloch, 1994, p.177). In France, the revised Declaration of Rights of Man of 1793, stated that "Education is the need of everyone" (Woloch, 1994, p.178). Education was too vital to the commonwealth and the progress of the nation to be left to families and the Catholic Church. As early as 1793, French law "obliged parents" to send their children to school, a schooling movement that gradually prevailed over opposition of the Church nearly a century later in the aforementioned Ferry laws (Woloch, 1994, 179).

PUBLIC SCHOOLS, THE VEHICLE OF EQUALITY

The early progressive view of education in France at the turn of the 19th century called for equality of schooling between girls and boys in rural areas and cities. Even though the convention of separating the sexes in schools had been accepted and each primary school had one section for boys and one for girls, the equality of educational opportunity between the sexes had been established as a tenet of the Enlightenment that influenced educational ideals and greatly enhanced the education of females. Moreover, the need for public schools in France created a need for teachers, and females were thereby given new employment opportunities beyond the domestic sphere of home and family. Unfortunately, because the Church schools of the *ancien regime* had been so

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deficient in the education of girls, few females could qualify as teachers, even the lowest standards. Male teachers, although poorly educated, qualified at three or four times the rate of females. The historic discrimination against women by the Christian Church had created such a dearth of educated women that “the prospects for the republican girls’ schools looked very bleak indeed” (Woloch, 1994, p.187). The Church schools of the old regime, which had been so instrumental in creating social repression of women and the poor and reinforcing the rigid class system with nobles, aristocrats and clergy at the top, were an anathema to the idea of reason, influencing the revolutionaries to call for “a wall of separation between education and religion” (Woloch, 1994, p.194). Public schools were to be religiously neutral or secular, not advancing any particular religious dogma. With regard to women, the “wall” would help shield girls from the customs of the Church that by definition were discriminatory. Moreover, it was believed that the “wall” would overcome the obscurantism that contracted the spectrum of knowledge available to both students and teachers.

Yet, ultimately the public schools of France fell back under control of the Church and were largely dissembled until the end of the 19th century. Public schools, however, did not disappear, but became largely schools for the poor. English common primary schools from 1870 and French public schools dating from the 1880's extended to females the same educational opportunities as to males. The Enlightenment must therefore be considered the cornerstone, the event in western civilization that broke the inertia that had retarded progress and had for centuries justified the subjugation of women.

Thereafter progress was made toward women’s equality; stimulated by educated people who had benefited from the creation of public common schools in western societies. Literacy of women doubled from 1780 to 1840 (Zinn, 2003, p.112), and women began to expand their social realm and gain respect by becoming school teachers and health workers. The compulsory school attendance laws that emerged in the United States during the 1830's requiring that families enroll their girls in school coupled with child labor laws that prohibited the captains of industry from inducing families to subject their children to hard labor in the factories, provided a foundation on which women were to be exposed to learning in public schools, beyond the restraints of the homes and the demands of the factories.

Moreover, these same public primary schools required an educated workforce of teachers in the United States, and therefrom women became the principal labor source for teaching. Normal schools were created after the French model to educate teachers, and even though women were generally barred from higher education in the then private sectarian system of higher education, the public normal schools and academies provided both an expanded opportunity for education and provided an employment outlet that was respectable, even though it was not well-paid.

Each generation of women who were exposed to public schools became more cognizant of the deprivations visited upon them by past custom, culture

and religious prescription. Mass education fueled social change and public introspection about customs and practices that were contrary to reason, of which sex discrimination was a principal offender (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.229). Education was believed to do a “great deal” to ameliorate the problems of mankind. The French, English, Americans and others in the west came to adopt the idea that the power of education could be central to the influence of human conduct. As noted above, Jeremy Bentham had earlier given impetus for this idea affecting both education and gender equality with his theory of the “greatest happiness of the greatest number” (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.231). Utilitarians following Bentham formulated ideas that led to widespread faith in education and the resulting reform of secondary education (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.231). Following Bentham, James Mill reasoned that ordinary people could obtain a high degree of attainment if they pursued knowledge and lived a life of reflection (Lawson and Silver, 1973, p.231).

It was undoubtedly this increasingly pervasive belief in learning that began to gradually break down the barriers to equality that had stultified society up to this time. With this learning came the reason and rationale that led to the reform that swept England in the 1830's, with the Reform Act of 1832, the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, the regulation of child labor in 1833, and the Poor Laws Amendments in 1834. Underlying these reforms was the increasing agitation for women's rights that the rising levels of education had fomented.

Fledgling public school systems, though they were incomplete and far from comprehensive, began to gain a foothold in Europe, beyond England and France,⁶ and in some of the states in the United States as well. New York created a system of common schools in 1812, and Massachusetts established a state board of education in 1837 (Cremin, 1980, pp.135-137). From the Massachusetts system, the ideal of the common public school was rapidly spread by Horace Mann, the most effective advocate of universal education in the United States. The parallels between the advancement of public education and the increasing sensitivity to gender inequality were particularly well-marked during this era. Public schools and the rights of women were opposed on many of the same grounds by taxpayers who thought their money should not be spent on education, from those who felt that education was to be acquired only within the domain of the home, from those who thought that girls should not receive education beyond the domestic sphere, and from the churches that objected to education except deriving from their own theological doctrine (Cremin, 1980, p.143). Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication* (1792) was, however, much on the minds of reformers of this period. The fact that the Bible could be cited to justify inequality began to mean less in the face of the rationality of Wollstonecraft's and others' reasoning. Accordingly, women could not be other than natural equals to men in rights, liberties and capabilities, and it became widely believed that education would enlighten and dramatize the injustice of gender inequality (Cremin, 1980, p.143).

The momentum of education was accompanied by a corresponding

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intensity of interest in women's rights. The common schools were crucial to an awakening of the nation to the necessity of redressing gender inequality. As common schools were justified and legitimized, a new social ladder was created for women to elevate themselves from the simple domesticity of the home (Cremin, 1980, p.145). In 1832, Beecher cited the train of dependency between schools and female equality, she observed that as women were educated, they would then become teachers or educated alumnae and she entreated all women to become engaged in the effort of education so as to arouse the nation to the causes of women and common education (Beecher, 1829, p.7; Cremin, 1980, p.146). It was Beecher who famously said in 1829:

It is to mothers, and to teachers, that the world is to look for the character which is to be enstamped on each succeeding generation, for it is to them that the great business of education is almost exclusively committed. And will it not appear by examination that neither mothers nor teachers have ever been properly educated for their profession. What is the profession of a woman? Is it not to form immortal minds, and to watch, to nurse, and to rear the bodily system, so fearfully and wonderfully made, and upon the order and regulation of which, the health and well-being of the mind so greatly depends (Beecher 1829, p.7; Cremin, 1980, p.144). It was on this theme of educated women that the case was made for expansion of public schools open to all and for equality of educational opportunity for women.

The AWAKENING OF WOMENS' RIGHTS

The emergence of the belief that universal public education was the cornerstone of a democracy that provided a realization of the miscarriages of justice that had been visited upon women for generations. What was later to be called "the women's movement" began with the drive for education and gained impetus with the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention in London. Many of the women who took a great interest in the slave question were the first generation of women in the United States who had received formal educations (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.2). The mounting quantum of knowledge among women at this time had naturally evolved to produce women who could rationally examine social and political practices as they applied to blacks, as well as women. Stimulated by education, the anti-slavery cause and its corollaries with sex discrimination, led to the historic convention at Seneca Falls, New York, July 19 and 20, 1848, where *The Declaration of Sentiments* was adopted, which became a landmark document espousing fundamental principles attacking the "supremacy of man," and the pervasive unequal treatment of women in virtually all aspects of public and private life (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.2). *The Declaration of Sentiments* charted several resolutions including, "that woman is man's equal-was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she

should be recognized as such” (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.2). The Seneca Falls Declaration was probably most important for its direct attack on the “supremacy of man,” the assumed man-woman relationship that empowered the male to rule in family, church and state (Becker, *et al.* 2001, pp.2-3).

Subsequently, the power of the women’s movement was to gain additional momentum from John Stuart Mill, who in 1869 penned his seminal tract entitled *The Subjection of Women*. He viewed the equality of women as a social necessity from the perspective of utilitarian happiness that would be gained by both the sexes from equality. The Inequality of women deprived both men and women of happiness. Mill clearly saw the disjuncture between reason and reality, the reality being that from “the earliest twilight of human society,” every woman has been in “a state of bondage to some man” (Mill, 2002, p.127). Mill argued that the law of superior strength, “the law of the strongest cannot be the reason of existence of anything” (Mill, 2002, p.128). Mill’s exposure of the illogic of gender discrimination became a touchstone for women’s liberation and the advancement of women’s suffrage.

SUFFERAGE AND EDUCATION

Mill contributed to a mood change toward women that had been nurtured by the influence of the emerging systems of universal education in Europe and the United States. Compulsory school attendance and child labor laws had been effective in getting the children out of the mills and into schools. By 1840, it was estimated that there were about 592,000 students in New York State between the ages of five and sixteen, and 549,000 were enrolled in public schools (Lannie, 1968).⁷ Such large numbers of school attendees were beginning to emerge in Massachusetts and other eastern and mid-eastern states, led by Henry Barnard, John D. Pierce in Michigan, Samuel Lewis and Catherine Beecher in Ohio, Caleb Mills in Indiana, and Robert Breckenridge in Kentucky (Cremin, 1980, p.175). These educational leaders, principally men elected as State Superintendents of Public Instruction, led a movement for common schools that educated girls and boys on equal terms, something that church schools had never before effected. With the advance of the public school movement, enrollments rose, prompting localities to establish schools, and even further magnified the need for a body of people to be teachers and administrators. The enrollment in primary, secondary and higher education in the United States rose from 2,025,636 in 1840 to 7,209,938 in 1870, and as a percent of the total population nearly doubled from 1.19 percent to 1.87 percent for the same period (Cremin, 1980, 179). Increased exposure to education, the rise of the public schools, the increase in number of newspapers, journals and the marketing of books all multiplied and paralleled the growing awareness of human rights of women and blacks.

By 1868, the United States had ratified the Fourteenth Amendment with its equal protection clause, and Congress had enacted the 1870 Civil Rights Act, preventing white men from negating black men’s votes by various means (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.11). In tandem with liberation of blacks, women

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sought voting rights with a suffrage amendment in 1868, which even though it failed constituted a significant milestone. Women, under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, caused the introduction of the “Anthony Amendment” in 1878, which also failed, but the presence of educated women as a political force had been established. The viability of the political power of women continued to gain momentum as more literate women emerged from public schools and colleges.

The political interests of women turned to corollary issues such as temperance, in part, to ameliorate the conditions of families, who suffered domestic violence because of intoxicated husbands (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.11). Educated women in substantial numbers helped forge the movements of the Progressive era as they continued to fight for political and economic reforms, such as minimum wage legislation, safer conditions in factories, and better schools.

The cause of women’s rights was also significantly advanced by the Civil War, World War I and World War II. After the Civil War, public schools began to gain momentum and expand upward from primary to high schools. A great irony existed: wars helped women; women were advocates of better schools, and the schools bred more effective advocates. The famous Kalamazoo case (30 Mich. 69) rendered by the Supreme Court of Michigan in 1874, helped clear the way for local communities to expend their own property tax monies of their own volition, to create high schools with or without explicit state legislative provisions.

EDUCATION AND A QUICKENED SENSE OF EQUALITY

Morison and Commager point out that after the Civil War, “The average teacher was a school ma’am” (1962, p.115). In 1870, two-thirds of the public school teachers were women, and this percentage increased throughout the remainder of the 1800’s (Morison and Commager, 1962, p.115). The great need for teachers evidenced a critical need for better education of women to fill the ranks of qualified teachers. In addition, the War had created “a quickened sense of equalitarianism” that required “higher education of women and for Negroes” (Morison and Commager, 1962, p.118). At the same time the Morrill Act of 1862 had caused the rapid development of land grant universities that dramatically expanded educational opportunity in higher education, reducing the reliance of the nation on the limited possibilities and vision of private universities. The constricted view of private education had been soberly expressed earlier by Timothy Dwight, the conservative and hypocritical President of Yale University, who observed that only the men of the more aristocratic families should attend higher education, because the poor were “. . . too idle, too talkative, too passionate, too prodigal, and too shiftless to acquire either property or character” (Niebuhr, 1932, p.12). Such philosophy of private colleges had been carried forward through the decades and with the exception of a few well-known private women’s colleges, the doors of higher education had been largely closed to the mainstream of young women who would

ultimately be relied upon to be the teachers of entire generations of Americans in the public schools. Most notable in setting the pattern for the great land grant universities were Cornell, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan State. Ezra Cornell, founder of Cornell University and Andrew White, Cornell's first president, defined the land grant university as a place where students were treated like adults and all were encouraged to attend regardless of color, sex or faith (Morison and Commager, 1962, p.120).

With the expansion of public schools, teacher training schools began to be created by state legislatures at a rapid pace. While the first normal schools in America were created in Massachusetts in 1839 and 1840 under the hand of Horace Mann (Cremin, 1980, p.146), the other states responded to establish a host of normal schools before 1920s.⁸ Along with the advancement of public common schools, and the creation of teacher training schools, during World War I the nation relied on women in the workforce to strengthen industrial production. This reliance on women further extricated the woman from the domesticity of the home enabling them to have greater independence of income and less reliance on the male.

The combination of these forces, the public schools, higher education, war and economic necessity finally resulted in the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, giving women the right to vote. The awareness of inequality further resulted in the introduction in Congress of the first Equal Rights Amendment in 1923. Of course the Amendment did not succeed, but it did indicate a new national attitude toward women's rights that had been slowly building.

It would probably be fair to say that the women's rights efforts peaked in 1923, as the country fell into the conservative mode as reflected by the Coolidge and Hoover elections. The "quicken sense" seemed to become moribund. Big business, which has seldom been friendly to civil rights, controlled the political stage of America. It is difficult to mark any singularly important event that transpired between 1923 and 1965 that materially advanced the interests of women, other than the general economics of World War II that of necessity, provided alternatives for women if they chose could escape the confines of domestic and conjugal financial repression. The forty years that measured this era of retrogression, or, at least, "benign neglect" was to culminate with the Kennedy-Johnson years in which new energy was generated for education, civil rights, and attendant women's rights. The period from 1963, when President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women recommended that the equal protection of the Fourteenth Amendment be interpreted to effectuate the purposes of an equal rights amendment, through *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 (410 vs 113, 93 S.Ct. 705) marked a decade of liberality and rejuvenation of women's rights (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.19).

Becker, Bowman and Torrey characterized President Kennedy's appointment of the Commission as the beginning of the "second-wave" of the feminist movement that was to have permanent marked effects on women's rights (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.19). It would be fair to say that the revival and re-

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emergence of women's rights was again notably linked to a new momentum to advance the quality of public education.

The natural attachment of equality and education was nowhere in American history more noteworthy than in the programs of President Johnson's "Great Society." It was in this period that women were better educated, living longer, working for wages outside the home, and able to enjoy effective birth control (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.19). Also in this period, women helped generate a revival of the struggles for economic and social justice that had been carried forward by the educated women of the 19th century, and these new women again helped bring to fruition the civil rights legislation of the 60's. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, in which Title VII prohibited sex discrimination in public and private employment. In 1965, the Congress, pressed by President Johnson passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that provided new stimulus for the education of children from low income families, which represented the first comprehensive federal legislation ever to aid public schools.

In May 1970, the ERA was revived in the U.S. Senate, and it passed the House in August 1971, and the Senate in February 1972. Six states ratified the Amendment in the next two days and by 1973, thirty states had ratified the Amendment (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.21). However, opposition to the ERA intensified and became well-organized thereafter, and the ratifications topped out at 35 states, two short of the number needed for enactment. No state ratified the ERA after 1977, and by 1982, the period of ratification had expired as the nation trudged through the new Reagan conservative era and the energy of reform subsided.

Significantly, it was in this period that the fundamentalist religious groups gained new political ascendancy and began to control much of the mass media with the avowed mission of reversing *Roe v. Wade* (410 U.S. 113, 93 S. Ct. 703, 1973). The return of family values and domestic virtue of a perceived earlier age became the code for discrimination. Yet it was in this decade of the 1970's that Title IX (20 U.S.C.A), the most important civil rights and education legislation emerged. Title IX sealed the symbiotic relationship between gender equity and education. From both Title VII and Title IX came a new thrust of litigation that moved women's employment and education interests forward. In 1971, prior to Title IX, less than 300,000 high school girls participated in interscholastic sports and by 1997, the number had risen to more than 2.4 million participants (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.777). While the entire increase cannot be attributed solely to Title IX, its influence was certainly substantial. Complementing Title IX were three other federal statutes that materially affected women's equity in education. These were: the Women's Education Equity Act of 1974 (20 U.S.C.A. 3041), which provided technical assistance to remove barriers in all areas of education; Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C.A. 2000c) that allocated funds for regional desegregation centers and grants to state education agencies to facilitate equitable treatment of students; and the 1976 amendments to the Vocational Education Act of 1963

(20 U.S.C.A. 1371) that required states to affirmatively address and eliminate sex bias in vocational education.

These statutory provisions, along with Title VII, had a dramatic and primary effect in the equality of treatment of women in the public schools, and in education generally. These acts and the responses thereto added immeasurably to the effectiveness of public schools in breaking down barriers to sex discrimination. The federal statutes that marked the progressive era in gender equality extending from 1964 to the present did much to ensure that the public school ideal was not waylaid by external social discrimination that always perched above the schools threatening to destroy their effectiveness as the principal engine of reform and progress in society.

SUMMARY

The struggle for women's rights had its meaningful beginning with the Enlightenment, from which was formed the foundation for equality and liberty building upon a quest for knowledge and reason. Knowledge and reason that were to distill truth, expose myth, reduce primitive urges of the selfish gene, burst upon the stage of political philosophy. Revelation and revealed truths imposed by those controlling institutions for exploitation of human fear of the unknown were examined under the light of reason -- thus the term Enlightenment.

The revealed truths as promulgated and sanctified by religious institutions had grown for thousands of years in the fertile earth of rampant ignorance of the people. Exploitation by the clergy, nobles and aristocrats was a principal feature that nurtured sexual exploitation and the encasement of women in a state of deprivation in perpetuity. The curative for mass ignorance could be no other than mass universal education.

Schools of the republic, the engines of literacy and social progress were therefore, an alternative to the limited, incomplete and failed education machinery of church and private schools that had dominated the intellectual landscape of Europe and America. The fortunes of women's equality were inextricably linked to the progress of public common schools. Today, the countries that have been the principal beneficiaries of the Enlightenment ideal of public schools are also predictably the countries in the world with the greatest equality between women and men. Economically developed countries, primarily the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) countries, rely on public school systems for the mass education of their populations. It is these countries, too, that tend to be in the forefront of gender equality are by-in-large the countries that have been most successful in breaking down other racial, cultural, social, and religious barriers to equality. Such advanced societies have high rates of high school and college completion for women (Becker, *et al.* 2001, p.775).⁹ Furthermore, the reading literacy rate of female students is higher than for men in these countries. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test results for 2000 indicated that in all 32 developed countries in the study, "females are on average better readers

than males” (OECD *Knowledge and Skills for Life, First Results from PISA 2000, Executive Summary*). The study concluded that “the most striking gender difference revealed by PISA 2000 is that females consistently outperform males in reading literacy” (OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life, First Results from PISA 2000, Executive Summary*, pp. 15-19). While males on average score better than women on mathematics and scientific skills, the difference was only statistically significant in only half the countries (OECD, *Knowledge and Skills for Life, First Results from PISA 2000, Executive Summary*, p.17). Therefore, this report evidences the effectiveness of mass universal public education in the western developed countries in the education of women. In all of these advanced countries, public schools are the principal means of education and knowledge conveyance from generation to generation.

That efficient systems of public schools are inextricably linked to progress in gender equity is beyond question. The enhancement of the public schools inevitably produces a marked historical effect on the rights of women. The evidence of the linkage between progress of women’s rights and the public schools in western countries richly validates Horace Mann’s simple assertion in 1848 that “education . . . beyond all the devices of human origin, is the great equalizer . . . , the balance-wheel of social machinery” (Alexander and Alexander, 2005, p.29)¹⁰ And it gives confirmation to Rousseau’s earlier trenchant and prescience observation that:

Public education...is one of the fundamental rules of popular or legitimate government. If children are brought up in common in the bosom of equality... they will learn to cherish one another mutually...” (Rousseau, 1973, p.149).

This may seem to confirm the obvious, however, government policy that degrades public schools will also likely ignore or do very little to advance women’s rights. Where governments reduce resources for public schools or divert resources to the private sector, there will be an attendant and corollary reduction in progress toward equality in every form.

Among the western developed nations today, the United States has left unfinished the business of gender, racial and economic equality. Though much progress has been made in the condition of females in the marketplace, opportunity and social conditions remain inferior to and largely dependent on males.

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Report of the Secretary of State upon Memorials from the City of New York, Respecting the Distribution of the Common School Moneys in that City, Referred to him by the Senate, Document No. 86, Documents of the Senate, April 26, 1841, p.6. See: Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968).
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ENDNOTES

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1. Herman, 2001. Hutcheson's essays and lectures from 1725 to 1740.
 2. Also, one should not forget that Rousseau, himself, was a very poor father having deserted his own children.

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3. *Declaration of Rights* 1789, Part Five, *Equality*, No. 4, See: McLean and Hewitt, p.267. Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, 1776, did, of course, include inalienable rights among which were equality; however, this was not explicitly translated into the Constitution in 1787.
 4. Here Zinn quotes Mrs. John Sandford's book, *Woman, in Her Social and Domestic Character*. He provides no further citation.
 5. Michael G. Mulhall, *The Progress of the World in Arts, Agriculture, Commerce, Manufacture, Instruction, Railways and Public Wealth Since the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Edward Stanford, 1880, p.89. (See Lawrence A Cremin) *American Education, The National Experience, 1783-1876*. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), p.491.
 6. Prussia actually led the way with the educational reforms of Frederick the Great. In 1722, Frederick I of Prussia decreed that universal education must be offered in each parish. By 1750, under Frederick II the Great, Prussia led all of Europe in primary and secondary education.
 7. Report of the Secretary of State upon Memorials from the City of New York, Respecting the Distribution of the Common School Moneys in that City, Referred to Him by the Senate, Document No. 86, Documents of the Senate, April 26, 1841, p.6. See: Vincent P. Lannie, *Public Money and Parochial Education* (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1968).
 8. Yet in spite of the advancements, the government made few advances in this era in women's rights and, indeed, in the rights of Negroes, as the period experienced a retrogression that produced the Jim Crow laws, separate-but-equal, and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 v.s.537, 165. Ct. 1138 (1896) and the Berea College case in 1908. In *Berea College*, perhaps the nadir of judicial respectability in the country, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the Day Law in Kentucky that required private schools and colleges to segregate by race. In the same year the U.S. Supreme Court also rendered *Muller v. Oregon*, 208 U.S. 412, 28 S. Ct. 324 (1908), in which the court used statistical and sociological data to prove that women were less capable than men in the workplace, and were therefore subject to legislation defining different work hour limits for women.
 9. For example, the rate of high school completion in the United States is 87%, in West Germany 86%, in United Kingdom 80%, in Canada 83% and France 66%. Italy lags behind at 43%.
 10. Horace Mann, "Education, the Balance Wheel of Social Machinery," *Twelfth Report to the Massachusetts State Board of Education*, 1848; See: Kern Alexander and M. David Alexander, *American Public School Law* (St. Paul Minn., West/Thompson, 2001, p.29).