

**WGS Graduate Commencement Address '06**  
**Professor Erica Harth**



I confess: in my worst moments I say, I've written off the planet. In my best moments—such as today—I say, hold on! The grads are coming! Not to place an undue burden on you, but we *are* hoping that you will go out and make a difference in the world. Some of you, if not all of you, already are. But we have great expectations. After all, you wouldn't have enrolled in the WGS program if you weren't interested in social change.

Now I am, of course, going to talk from my own personal perspective: generational, political, and cultural. So as a Second-Wave feminist who has more or less adapted to the Third Wave and who is struggling with what lies beyond, I say that we, Second-Wavers, have been given—and take—a lot of credit for changing the world. Would the New York Times, to mention only one small example, have learned how to use “Ms.” properly without us? Would it have changed its wedding section to include same-sex marriages if not for our inspiration?

You are going out into a world vastly different from the one that greeted me when I received my PhD. in 1968. We women of my generation endured wolf whistles on the streets, and unwanted advances from men at the university and in the workplace, where “sexual harassment” was an unknown phrase. We made coffee for our male political comrades—and on and on. You've heard the litany of offenses.

Yet complacency is completely out of order. Despite our efforts, we have not been able to prevent backsliding in the United States in the direction of the Bad Old Days of back-alley abortions. What have we done about the rising poverty rate in this country, especially among women and children? For that matter, what have we done to lessen social inequality here, which is the greatest among the so-called advanced nations of the earth?

We should be celebrating many more victories than we are. After all, in 1968 we had to resort to the typewriter and the mimeograph machine to get our ideas out. And back then we had no Women's Studies programs let alone Women's and Gender Studies programs. The internet has brought together feminists from around the world, has brought news, issues, and problems from the farthest reaches of the earth to our own doorstep. And the problems of the world have now become our problems.

In 1968 it took a long time to travel to Europe, much less Asia, Africa and other far-flung places. Those places were truly different from home then. No one was talking about globalization (although much earlier Karl Marx did, without using the word). Now we are all so interconnected that not only are we just a click away from colleagues in Australia, say; but what we may do in one country, or even one corporation, political party or group, could affect everyone on earth.

The electronics revolution certainly revolutionized my life as an academic. That revolution, as we know, holds almost unlimited promise. And yet we now face censorship, spooky electronic surveillance, and looming fees for what so far has been a free ride. In these and many other ways, the days seem very dark. Genocide from Bosnia to Rwanda to Darfur has gone practically unchecked. The situation in the Mideast seems more volatile than ever. The senseless deaths (well, are deaths ever “sensible?”) in Iraq mount daily. Basic human needs in the United States, such as health care, housing, education, and employment, are going unmet or poorly met at best for a large segment of the population. The United States has joined the infamous ranks of the many countries around the world that trample on elementary human rights. Civil liberties at home have been severely compromised since 9/11. And speaking of compromise, whatever is going to happen to our environment?

Bad things happen at home, and nothing changes. Hurricane Katrina causes suffering and deaths that might have been lessened if not averted had the current administration responded promptly and effectively. At present there are plans afoot to send the National Guard to police our southern border, as if their ranks weren’t already depleted enough by Iraq to impair their effectiveness in local and national emergencies. The administration seems to have lied to us about WMD in Iraq, and now a similar scenario is playing out in Iran. In the 1950s the FBI was snooping around looking under beds for Commies; today Big Brother is snooping around on the internet and in libraries looking for terrorists.

I’m getting to the expectations part.

Are you an online political junkie? How often do you tune into MoveOn or True Majority? In other words, is your political and feminist activism confined mainly to the internet? If so, remember People Power! In France recently it was people in the streets who turned around a new law intended to address unemployment by discriminating against young, first-time employees. Nothing can substitute for massive people power. Cindy Sheehan may have done as much herself as MoveOn to protest the situation in Iraq. There she was on Mother’s Day with Susan Sarandon and so many other women protesting at the White House in a 24-hour vigil.

So here’s my wish list of your future accomplishments, the first of which is to mobilize people power—through the internet, at least in part, if need be—to get our voices into the streets and onto the Washington mall. After that, the following items:

- 1) Since 1968 women have gotten a lot more powerful. We are more than half the world population, and now we increasingly hold some very powerful positions in the world. We can be a force for good and for constructive change. You are anthropologists, social policy wonks, humanists. Each of you will be well-positioned not only to do your own thing, but to collaborate in large social movements. It’s time to think big and to organize. Even the Democrats are starting to come back to the strategy of the Big Tent, which the Republicans have been using very effectively for a while now. Democrats are starting to perceive the need for developing Big Ideas in order to reconnect with their base: labor, so-called

- minorities (who by 2020, by the way, will no longer be minorities, if the projections are correct), working people, the middle class. Who is better positioned than you to help create your own Big Tent for social change?
- 2) Your domestic agenda is cut out for you: health care and abortion rights, education, basic human and civil rights, all arenas in which women have historically struggled to obtain equality. It looks like the struggle is far from over.
  - 3) I want you to look unblinkingly at some of the international issues that are now before you: the implications of the global movement of populations, immigration documented and undocumented, international regulations on human rights. They are not problems that admit of easy solutions. The ANC leader Jacob Zuma is acquitted in South Africa of rape charges. Is he fit to resume a leading political role in his country? He still faces a trial on charges of corruption. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Member of Parliament in the Netherlands and outspoken critic of violence against Muslim women, has had her Dutch citizenship revoked. It's the latest chapter in the storm of controversy that she has raised. Has she done Muslim women a service or a disservice? Is the Dutch government looking for excuses to crack down on immigrants, particularly Muslim immigrants?
  - 4) I want you to roll up your sleeves and get involved in these big issues. What can you do to bring scholars and activists together on addressing the questions that I've mentioned, and so many more? Now is the moment for you to help overcome divisiveness and sniping among feminists—we don't have time for it! Yes, we have deconstructed the sixties' slogan, "Sisterhood is powerful," but with the knowledge that we have gained from that deconstruction we need to move toward unity in solving the large problems that we all recognize as such.
  - 5) And the final item on my wish list for you is the following: You are going to be very, very busy, especially if you are planning on starting a family or already have one. Please, make time to stop not only to hear yourselves think, but also to enjoy life. Don't overburden yourselves so much that you will undermine all that I know you will be doing to set the world on a saner course.