President Van Zandt,
Professor Aleinikoff,
Ms. Juju Chang,

Dear students, dear friends,

It is a great pleasure to be here today. Thank you for honouring me with this degree and through me, the United Nations and our staff around the world.

The New School is a special place. I am an engineer by training and physics has been the biggest intellectual passion of my life. But I reserve my greatest admiration for artists, philosophers, social scientists and those who explain the world and make it more beautiful.

I thank the New School for helping to uplift us and give meaning to our lives.

Dear students, dear friends,

As a man born in western Europe, I have enjoyed many privileges. But my childhood under a military dictatorship in Portugal opened my eyes to injustice and oppression. Throughout my political career, as Prime Minister, and as the leader of the United Nations refugee agency, I have always felt compelled to fight for justice, equality and human rights.

Today, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, I see one overwhelming injustice across the globe; an abuse that is crying out for attention.
That is gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls.

Everywhere, women are worse off than men, simply because they are women.

Migrant and refugee women, those with disabilities, and women members of minorities of all kinds face even greater barriers.

This discrimination harms us all.

Just as slavery and colonialism were a stain on previous centuries, women’s inequality should shame us all in the 21st.

Because it is not only unacceptable; it is stupid.

Only through the equal participation of women can we benefit from the intelligence, experience and insights of all of humanity.

Women’s equal participation is vital to stability, helps prevent conflict, and promotes sustainable, inclusive development.

Gender equality is the prerequisite for a better world.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear students,

This is not a new issue. Women have been fighting for their rights for centuries.

Five hundred years ago, Queen Nzinga Mbandi of the Mbundu waged war against Portuguese colonial rule in present-day Angola.

Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792, is often seen as the mother of western feminism.

Sixty years later, Sojourner Truth delivered an impassioned plea for women’s rights while she worked to abolish slavery.

The women’s rights movement came of age in the twentieth century. Women heads of state dispelled any doubts about women’s ability to lead. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted the equal rights of men and women; and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women outlined a vision of gender equality.

Today, young women like Malala Yousafzai and Nadia Murad are breaking barriers and creating new models of leadership.

But despite these advances, the state of women’s rights remains dire.

Inequality and discrimination are the norm, everywhere.
Progress has slowed to a standstill – and in some cases, been reversed.

There is a strong and relentless pushback against women’s rights.

Violence against women, including femicide, is at epidemic levels. More than one in three women will experience violence in some form during her lifetime.

Legal protections against rape and domestic violence are being diluted or rolled back. Rape within marriage continues to be legal in 34 countries. Women’s sexual and reproductive rights are under threat from all sides.

Women leaders and public figures face harassment, threats and abuse, online and off.

The policing of personal freedom and dress are a daily reality for millions of women and girls.

From governments to corporate boards to awards ceremonies, women are excluded from the top table.

Policies that penalize women, like austerity and coercive reproduction, are back in fashion.

Peace negotiations still exclude women, twenty years after all countries pledged to include them.

And the digital age could make these inequalities even more entrenched.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power.

We live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture. We have done so for millennia.

The historian Mary Beard has identified the deep historical roots of patriarchy in western culture.

In the Odyssey, written three thousand years ago, Homer describes Telemachus telling his mother, Penelope, to be quiet and to leave the talking to men.

Unfortunately, Telemachus would not be out of place in some of my meetings with world leaders.

Patriarchy – a social system founded on inheritance through the male line -- continues to affect every area of our lives. We are all – men and women, girls and boys – suffering the consequences.
Male-dominated power structures underpin our economies, our political systems and our corporations.

Even Hollywood fame does not protect women from men who wield physical, emotional and professional power over them. I salute those who have courageously spoken up and fought back.

A hidden layer of inequality is built into the institutions and structures that govern all our lives -- but are based on the needs of just half the population.

The writer Caroline Criado Perez calls this “default man” thinking: the unquestioned assumption that men are standard, and women are an aberration.

This has led to the biggest data gap in the world. Women are not counted, and their experiences don’t count.

The consequences are everywhere, from toilet facilities to bus routes. Women are at higher risk of being injured in a car accident, because seats and safety belts fit default man. Women have a higher fatality rate from heart attacks because diagnostic tools are designed around default man.

Default man thinking even extends into space, which is indeed the final frontier – for women. More than 150 men have walked in space, but just a handful of women, partly because spacesuits are designed for default man. No woman has walked on the moon -- although women mathematicians played an essential part in putting men there.

At last, we are finally celebrating the achievements of these women, including Katherine Johnson who passed away this week.

All too often, alongside violence, control, male-dominated power structures and hidden discrimination, women and girls contend with centuries of misogyny and the erasure of their achievements.

From the ridiculing of women as hysterical or hormonal, to the routine judgement of women based on their looks; from the myths and taboos that surround women’s natural bodily functions, to mansplaining and victim-blaming -- misogyny is everywhere.

Conversely, across centuries and cultures, words like “genius” and “brilliant” are used far more often to describe men than women.

Which is less surprising when men have made the rules and banned women from participating.
The damage done by patriarchy and inequality goes far beyond women and girls. Men have a gender too. It is defined so rigidly that it can trap men and boys into stereotypes that involve risky behaviour, physical aggression and an unwillingness to seek advice or support.

As the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie puts it: “Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage.”

Around the world, men have shorter life spans than women; they are more likely to be in prison and to use and experience violence; and they are less likely to seek help. We have defined men’s power in ways that come at great cost – to men themselves.

Gender equality has enormous benefits for men’s personal relationships. Men who share caregiving and spend more time with their families are happier, and have happier children.

On a larger scale, transforming the balance of power is essential, not only as a question of human rights, personal development, health and wellbeing.

It is critical to solving some of the most damaging and intractable problems of our age, from deepening inequality and polarization to the climate crisis.

Excellencies, dear students,

I see five areas in which achieving gender equality will transform our world.

First, conflict and violence.

There is a straight line between violence against women, civil oppression and conflict.

Trillions of dollars are spent every year on peace and security. But we should be asking: whose peace? Whose security?

Inter-state conflict makes headlines, but in some of the most violent parts of the world, levels of femicide – the killing of women – are comparable to a war zone. 137 women around the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. Impunity rates are above 95 percent in some countries.

In other words, we have men waging war on women – but no one is calling for a ceasefire or imposing sanctions.

And how a society treats the female half of its population is a significant indicator of how it will treat others.
Rape and sexual slavery are routinely used as a tactic of war, and misogyny is part of the ideology of almost all violent extremist groups.

Conversely, involving women leaders and decision-makers in mediation and peace processes leads to more lasting and sustainable peace.

The United Nations is committed to putting women at the centre of our conflict prevention, peacemaking, peacebuilding and mediation efforts – and to increasing the numbers of our women peacekeepers.

Second, the climate crisis.

The existential emergency we are facing is the result of decisions that were taken mainly by men, but have a disproportionate impact on women and girls.

Drought and famine mean women work harder to find food and water, while heatwaves, storms and floods kill more women and girls than men and boys.

Women and girls have long been leaders and activists on the environment, from Wangari Maathai and Jane Goodall to the Fridays for Future movement.

But the impact of gender inequality on climate action goes deeper.

Initiatives to reduce and recycle are overwhelmingly marketed at women, while men are more likely to put their faith in untested technological fixes.

There is plenty of evidence that women are more open than men to reducing their personal environmental impact.

And recent studies show that women economists and parliamentarians are more likely to support sustainable, inclusive policies.

There is a risk that safeguarding our planet is seen as “women’s work” – just another domestic chore.

I am grateful to young people, Generation Z, including many of you here in this room, who are working for climate action and gender equality, while recognizing the reality of non-binary identities and solutions.

Macho posturing will not save our planet.

Gender equality, including men stepping up and taking responsibility, is essential if we are to beat the climate emergency.

Dear students, dear friends,
The third area in which women’s rights and equal opportunities can create a breakthrough is in building inclusive economies.

Worldwide, women still earn just 77 cents for every dollar earned by men. The latest research by the World Economic Forum says it will take until 2255 to close the gender pay gap.

How can I tell my granddaughters that their granddaughters’ granddaughters will still be paid less than a man for the same work?

The gender pay gap is one reason why 70 percent of the world’s poor are women and girls.

Another is that women and girls do some 12 billion hours of unpaid care work around the world every day – three times more than men.

In some communities, women can spend 14 hours a day cooking, cleaning, fetching wood and water and caring for children and the elderly.

Economic models classify these hours as “leisure time”.

Gross Domestic Product puts zero value on anything that happens in the home. But this flawed metric is the baseline for economic decision-making, distorting policies and denying women opportunities.

Women who do have an income are more likely than men to invest in their families and communities, strengthening economies and making them more resilient.

Women also tend to take a longer view. Corporate boards that include them are more stable and profitable.

The recent decision by one of the world’s biggest investment banks not to take a company public unless it has a woman board member was not made on moral grounds. It was financial good sense.

Women’s equal economic rights and opportunities are a global imperative if we are to build a fair globalization that works for all.

Fourth, the digital divide.

When a couple complained last year that the man’s credit limit was 20 times higher than his wife’s, despite her higher credit score, the discrepancy was blamed on an algorithm.

But with women occupying just 26 per cent of jobs in Artificial Intelligence, it is no surprise that many algorithms are biased towards men.
Digital technology can be an enormous force for good. But I am deeply concerned by the male domination of technological professions in the universities, start-ups and Silicon Valleys of this world.

These tech hubs are already shaping the economies and societies of the future, with a huge impact on the evolution of power relations.

Unless women play an equal role in designing digital technologies, progress on women’s rights could be reversed.

Lack of diversity will not only expand gender inequality. It will limit the innovation and scope of new technologies, making them less useful for everyone.

Fifth and finally, political representation.

Women’s participation in parliaments around the world has doubled in the last 25 years – to one quarter. Fewer than one-tenth of states are led by a woman.

But women’s representation in government is not about stereotypical “women’s issues” like opposing sexual harassment or promoting childcare. Women in government drive social progress and meaningful changes to people’s lives.

Women are more likely to advocate for investment in education and health; and to seek cross-party consensus and common ground.

When the numbers of women reach a critical mass, governments are more likely to innovate, and to challenge established orthodoxies.

In other words, women in politics are redefining and redistributing power.

It is no coincidence that the governments that are redefining GDP to include wellbeing and sustainability are led by women.

It is simple math. Women’s participation improves institutions.

Doubling the resources, capacity and expertise we put into decision-making benefits everyone.

One of my first priorities as Secretary-General of the United Nations was to bring more women into leadership positions. On 1st January this year, we achieved gender parity – 90 women and 90 men – in the ranks of full-time senior leadership, two years ahead of the target date I set at the start of my tenure. We have a roadmap in place to achieve parity at all levels in the years ahead.
This long-overdue change is an essential recognition of the equal rights and abilities of women staff. It is also about improving our efficiency and effectiveness for the people we serve.

Dear students, dear friends,

The opportunity of man-made problems – and I choose these words deliberately – is that they have human-led solutions.

Thriving matriarchal societies throughout history and around the world show that patriarchy is not inevitable.

We have recently seen women, many of them young, demanding transformational change.

From Sudan to Chile to Lebanon, they are calling for freedom from violence, greater representation and urgent climate action, and questioning economic systems that fail to deliver opportunities and fulfilment for many.

We owe these young leaders our voices and our support.

Gender equality is part of the DNA of the United Nations. The equal rights of women and men are included in the Charter – our founding document. As we mark our 75th anniversary this year, along with the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women, we are redoubling our efforts to support women’s rights across the board.

Last month, the United Nations launched a Decade of Action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals – the blueprint for our partnership with governments to build peaceful, prosperous and inclusive societies on a healthy planet.

Gender equality is a goal in itself, and key to achieving the other 16 goals.

The Decade of Action is aimed at transforming institutions and structures, broadening inclusion and driving sustainability.

Repealing laws that discriminate against women and girls; increasing protection against violence; closing the gap in girls’ education and digital technology; and ending the gender pay gap are just some of the areas we are targeting.

Women’s equal leadership and participation are fundamental.

That is why I have always supported quotas – the most effective way to achieve a radical shift in the balance of power. Now is the time for gender parity in governments, parliaments, corporate boards and institutions everywhere.
Over the next two years, I intend to deepen my personal commitment to highlighting and supporting gender equality in all areas of our work.

I will contact governments that have discriminatory laws on their books to advocate for change and offer our support; and urge each new government to achieve gender parity in senior leadership.

I will explore ways to maximize the influence of the United Nations to make sure women have equal representation in peace processes; and strengthen our work on the links between violence against women and international peace and security. I will continue to meet women whose lives have been affected by violence.

I will also advocate for GDP to include measures of wellbeing and sustainability, and for unpaid domestic work to be given its true value.

I am committed to ending “default male” thinking across the United Nations. We are a data-driven organization; it is essential that our data does not make the ridiculous assumption that men are the norm and women are the exception.

We need women’s voices and contributions at the forefront in peace negotiations and trade talks; at the Oscars and the G20; in board rooms and classrooms; and at the United Nations General Assembly.

Excellencies, dear students, dear friends,

Gender equality is a question of power; power that has been jealously guarded by men for millennia.

It is about an abuse of power that is damaging our communities, our economies, our environment, our relationships and our health.

We must urgently transform and redistribute power, if we are to safeguard our future and our planet.

That is why all men should support women’s rights and gender equality.

And why I am a proud feminist.

Women have equaled and outperformed men in almost every sphere.

It is time to stop trying to change women, and start changing the systems that prevent them from achieving their potential.

Our power structures have evolved gradually over thousands of years. One further evolution is long overdue.
The 21st century must be the century of women’s equality.
Let us all play our part in making it so.

Thank you.