

Madam President, Madam Secretary-General, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates:

It is my great privilege to be here today, representing Canada at this historic event.

Fifty years ago, at the founding of this organization, the nations of the world adopted a Charter affirming the equal rights of women and men. With this commitment, the United Nations pledged to end centuries of discrimination against women.

The 1995 United Nations Human Development Report calls the long walk toward our equality "the defining movement of the 20th Century."

Twenty years ago, at the United Nations' first World Conference on Women, an international effort was launched to fulfil the UN Charter commitment - the attainment of a global "culture of equality." Yet, in 1995 there is no country where women are completely equal - not in pay, nor in status, nor in opportunity or power.

And that, Madam President, is why we are here - to claim our equal rights.

The task ahead is both difficult and daunting. We have committed ourselves to adopting a global Platform for Action accelerating progress on equality for women worldwide.

There have been predictions that we may fail in our task. That differing perspectives over the rightful place of women in society will divide us. That a backlash against equality will hinder our ability to move forward, or to hold on to past gains. This must not happen. We must not fail.

In Canada, there was a time when the idea that women should vote was considered unthinkable. When the notion that women should attend university was unacceptable. When the possibility of a woman becoming a doctor or a judge was beyond reach.

Today almost no one would question the right of women to vote, pursue higher education, become a doctor or a judge. For now we know that equality benefits not only women, but all of society.

In Canada, as around the world, women have been a driving force in transforming the lives of women. Women have placed a high priority on this World Conference as an important milestone on the road to equality.

Three years ago, Canada embarked on its preparations for this conference. We did so in the spirit of inclusiveness and collaboration with women's organizations and the many sectors in Canadian society - human rights groups, academics, labour - who are partners in the movement toward equality. We provided