I am delighted to be here with you today in this institution born of the desire of a society and of a man, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, to establish in Moravia another centre of education and culture, alongside Charles University in Prague.

As someone who was once a passionate student of linguistics and comparative literature, I cannot help but be moved to find myself in the university where the great thinker Roman Jakobson taught. Roland Barthes once said that above all, he represents “the meeting of scientific thought and the creative spirit” in exploring the sound shape of language.

I am also delighted to be in one of the most important centres for Canadian studies in Central Europe.

I would like to share with you some of my own past experiences before we begin our discussion on various aspects of cultural diversity and gender issues.

I spent the early years of my professional career accompanying women who had suffered many forms of physical and psychological violence.

I know the incredible efforts that these women— whose inner flame had been brutally snuffed out—have to make before, little by little, they find that spark again.

We had to set up a network of shelters for them and break the silence into which they are unjustly confined and the indifference with which they are all too often confronted.

Take my country, Canada, for example, where women make up nearly half of the labour force.

Even in a country as forward-thinking as Canada, women are still paid less than men for equal work, even when they have higher levels of education.

It is women who still work more unpaid hours.

It is women who are still most likely to live in poverty.

It is women who are still at greatest risk of being attacked, behind closed doors at home or in the street.

For nearly ten years, I helped these courageous women in need and I know the determination it takes for them to confront prejudice and the anguish of solitude, to find
the will every day to rebuild their shattered lives.

And what of immigrant women, especially those who do not yet have an official status?

Many of them live in poverty.

Because their skills go unrecognized; because they have to start over from nothing; because they are alone, with nowhere to turn, no means of supporting themselves, no family to depend on.

These women are often forced into the vicious cycle of menial work, earning barely enough to live on.

Grappling with exclusion, they live in fear, in isolation, with absolutely no chance of making the choices that are so vital to their survival, choices like a decent job, health and acceptable living conditions.

The situation may seem bleak, but it is not unique to Canada—far from it—and requires that we face these problems head on, by first naming them.

The road to equality is long indeed, and despite all that we have accomplished, it seems at times that we are back where we began.

As a journalist, I often witnessed the suffering of women and girls around the world. For financial reasons, they are exploited, humiliated, impoverished; they are denied education and traded as little more than objects.

Their every action is decided for them.

In the name of ideology, they are even harassed, assaulted, beaten, raped and murdered.

One of the most moving experiences I have had as governor general of Canada was a trip to Kabul in 2007 to speak to Afghan women on International Women’s Day, to tell them that there were many of us who cried out with indignation for them when they could not cry out for themselves.

The women of Afghanistan, the women of Africa, the women of the Americas, the women of Europe, the women of Canada whom I have met during my travels over the past three years have convinced me of one thing.

They have convinced me that the future of the world depends on women.

I have often said that when you empower women, you will see a decrease in poverty, illiteracy, disease and violence.
Women are the ones who generally take care of their children’s health and education.

Women are the ones who instill in them the values of compassion and openness in a world where the warrior instinct still too often prevails.

The battles women have fought and continue to fight to ensure that their rights are respected are in themselves an affirmation of human dignity.

To attack the dignity of women is to fly in the face of life itself; it is to make a mockery of humanity.

I believe in the power of words and actions.

I believe that we all have a vital role to play, together, in eradicating all forms of oppression in our societies, in knocking down barriers to equality, in building a world that values life in all of its dimensions.

And now, the floor is yours.