International Women’s Day is a call for solidarity that each of us, here and elsewhere in the world, sends out to the four winds.

Of course, in this case, I am referring to the “wind of change” that the President of Liberia urged on March 8, 2006, during a keynote address to UNESCO, to reverse and dismantle the structures that continue to restrain “the full and resourceful potential of womanhood.”

Dear friends, I like to think that on that day, the wind heard those words spoken by the first female president of the African continent, whom I had the joy and privilege of meeting in 2007 when she visited Canada.

And it is with great emotion that I have come here today, at her invitation, to be a part of the International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security.

I believe that the time that we will be spending together reflecting, consolidating our ideas and developing common strategies is priceless.

Excellence, I promised I would be here, and I keep my promises. So, here I am.

I have always thought that ignoring the plight of women is not only an inexcusable lack of responsibility, but also an unjustifiable crime against humanity.

This conviction goes to the very heart of my civic engagement.

This conviction motivated the young woman I once was, whose early professional years were spent helping women who had suffered many forms of violence and setting up a network of shelters to help them rebuild their lives.

This conviction continues to guide the woman who stands before you now, who has resolutely chosen to embrace the notion of community rather than the “fend for yourself mentality” that does nothing but feed the tensions that grip the world.

Everywhere that I have travelled as governor general of Canada, I have met women who are individually remarkable and collectively regenerative.
From here, in Africa, where I undertook my first State visits, to Haiti, the first Black republic in the world and the land of my ancestors; from the Arctic to Brazil to Afghanistan, I have met women who have ignited in my heart a “spark of thought,” to borrow Léopold Sédar Senghor’s beautiful imagery.

I have learned so much from these women.

From those survivors who, like my grandmother Dejanira who worked her fingers to the bone to sew clothing that she then sold on the sidewalks of Port-au-Prince to send her children to school, I learned that “education is freedom.” Education is key.

From those fighters who have found the courage in themselves to rebuild their lives after years of violence and abuse, I learned that we should never remain silent or give up.

From those healers among North America’s first peoples who are tending the wounds of the soul, I learned that it is possible to break the circles of exclusion and oppression and to replace them with circles of sharing and healing.

From those women determined to take a stand who, in Algeria, had been “more courageous than the West itself in standing up to fundamentalism,” I learned that the fight for freedom will never be over until freedom can be enjoyed by all.

From those women who resist the restraints of oppression and who, in Afghanistan, removed the burka that left them in shadow and looked me straight in the eyes, I learned the power of indignation.

From those daring women who, in Mali, declared that the practice of female genital mutilation is a violation of basic human rights, I learned that traditions should not be exercised to the detriment of some and with the complicity of others.

From those trailblazers who, around the world and especially in Africa’s Great Lakes region, flout the divisions invented by narrow minds, I learned that respect for human dignity is the most powerful antidote to barbarism.

From those women who seek justice and who, like Bernadette Ntumba from the Democratic Republic of Congo, denounce the abuses wrought upon girls, sisters and mothers, I learned the madness of “a war that ends in women’s bellies.”

From those mothers whose children die in combat, I learned the words that speak of loss.

From the increasing number of female leaders, who see every “ordeal” as an “opportunity,” as Michèle Pierre-Louis, Prime Minister of Haiti, recently told me, I learned that defeatism runs counter to progress, even in the poorest country in the Americas.

And, from those incredibly courageous women of Liberia—yes, right here in
Liberia—who, day after day, defied the forces of violence, destruction and brutality in the hope of peace for all, I have learned that everything is possible.

I still have much to learn from the women I meet and from those whose struggles I see whose reversals of fortune cause me to weep, whose hopes I share.

And of all of those hopes, the one I want to share with my own daughter comes from the work of women who, though they receive only a fraction of the world’s resources, work tirelessly to improve the lives of those around them.

The work of women who measure their success in terms of what they give, rather than what they take.

Give women the means to act, and you will see a decrease in violence, hunger, illness, illiteracy.

When you exclude women, you fail.

Because women never forget that life is our most precious asset.

It is for the sake of life itself that women choose to mobilize and take action, to perpetuate in their every word and every deed—for their children and for humanity—that irrepressible and irreplaceable force that is every being who may at times suffer but who remains ever hopeful.

That is also the reason why I firmly believe that the example of African women, in the powerful words of Senegalese Siga Sow, “is the surest guide for younger generations on the luminous path of negritude in motion.”

Yes, the women of Africa, the women of the Americas, of Asia, of the Middle East, of Europe, the women of the world are part of humanity in motion.

Thank you for welcoming me so warmly and for giving me the opportunity to speak to you today.

I am so proud of us today!