Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening. From the heart of Nairobi, beneath the vast skies of Africa—the sole home of a United Nations headquarters in the Global South—I extend warm greetings to you all. I am Zainab Hawa Bangura, the Director-General of the United Nations office at Nairobi at the level of the Under-Secretary General.

As we gather to mark another International Women’s Day on March 8th, this year’s theme, “Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress,” resonates with a profound and personal significance.

Let me take you on a journey to a small village in northern Sierra Leone, Yonibana, where my story begins. A place where the rhythm of life pulses to the beat of tradition and where, when I was born, the concept of a woman in leadership was as foreign as the moon in the daytime sky. Here, women were assets, part of their husband's inheritance to be distributed upon his death. Born to illiterate parents surviving on less than a dollar a day, I was the girl whose future was supposed to be written before she could even spell her name.

Can you imagine a world where a girl's destiny is sealed by her gender? My father, a Muslim cleric, believed this world firmly. He was prepared to marry me off at the tender age of 12. But my mother, the heroine of this tale, defied this fate. She vowed that if she had any say in the matter, her daughter would break this cycle—through investing in her education.

Despite our dire circumstances, my mother instilled in me a belief that education was the golden key capable of unlocking infinite doors. Together, we embarked on a journey fuelled by sacrifice and determination, aiming for a milestone no one in our family had ever reached: a university degree and, perhaps, even beyond.

Through her unwavering belief in the power of education, my mother transformed my life and our entire family's destiny. We were lifted from the depths of poverty to heights I once could only dream of. My path led me to serve as minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Minister of Health and Sanitation in Sierra Leone. Today, I stand before you as the Director-General of the United Nations office at Nairobi.

My journey illustrates a simple, yet profound truth echoed in the popular African proverb: "When you educate a man, you educate an individual. But when you educate a woman, you educate a family and a nation." The investment made by that illiterate woman from Yonibana in the education of her only child, who happens to be a girl, did not just lift her family out of poverty; it launched a legacy of knowledge and empowerment that will flow through generations.

As we contemplate this year's theme, "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress," let us remember the transformative power of education. Let us commit to making the education of girls and women not just a priority but a fundamental right. In doing so, we do not merely change the trajectory of individual lives; we reshape the future of our nation and the global community.

Thank you.