Before I begin, it’s important that we acknowledge that we are gathered on the ancestral land of the Dakota (Sioux) and other tribal communities of Minnesota. Together, let us honor their elders, past and present. We thank them for their stewardship on this land.

Acknowledgment is a simple, powerful way of showing respect and a step toward correcting the stories and practices that erase Indigenous people’s history and culture, and toward inviting and honoring the truth.

Good morning all you badass women and feminists! I am thrilled to be here in Bloomington, St Paul, Minneapolis with you at the epicenter of feminist activism of 2019. We are here to refine and validate the feminist agenda rising. Our time is NOW.

The National Organization for Women is the most recognized, influential, powerful, longest lived women’s rights organization in the United States, and world-wide. It continues to be, because of you your activism and your advocacy. I acknowledge and honor your tenacity, courage and strength for it takes all of these attributes to bring about any end to the dominant, toxic masculine culture we all have been raised and live in.

This conference is all about empowering women to bring about transformative change in our country and around the world.

The results of the 2017 and 2018 elections have proved that we can overcome the odds, stand up to big money, expose the lies and mobilize the grassroots to elect feminist candidates and to do no less than advance civilization.

We almost immediately see the results when newly elected women take their seat at the table. We have the experience of Nevada and Illinois finally ratifying the equal rights amendment.

We are only one state short of full ratification. This is one of the reasons why it’s so important we help Virginia NOW activists turn Virginia blue. We have dedicated financial resources and talents to help elect feminists to office so that in 2020 Virginia will be the 38th state to ratify the equal rights amendment. This is our feminist agenda rising.

We are successfully advancing our feminist agenda with state legislative wins. As you know, when we take action, we win.

Recently in New York we stopped the enactment of commercialized surrogacy a bill that would have commodified a woman’s body, calling us a gestational carrier. Not a woman, not a human being, a gestational
carrier. Once again dehumanizing women, reducing us to chattel. Thank you, NY NOW, for the action you have taken.

In Rhode Island, we neutered a trigger bill, to criminalize abortion, if Roe should be overturned. Thank you, Rhode Island NOW for the action you have taken.

And we are filing amicus briefs to end abortion bans in Missouri and Louisiana and the other 4 states who are enacting them with the help of local NOW lawyers. If you are a lawyer, please attend the lawyers caucus meeting tonight to connect with Marcia Cohen, NOW’s legal counsel to help with these briefs. We’ll ask our coalition partners to join us in this endeavor.

But inevitably, we will face a backlash from those who seek to divide us, minimize our accomplishments and fuel conflict based on false accusations and manipulated data. We saw this happen immediately following the 2016 election, when it was widely reported that Donald Trump’s victory was due to him winning the votes of 52% of white women.

But this number came from exit polls, which are notoriously biased and structurally flawed.

A later analysis published by the Pew Research Center found that the percentage of white women who voted for Trump was 47%, compared to 45% for Clinton. Statistically, that’s essentially a tie—which is a lot different than a 7-point margin for Trump.

We must not allow the patriarchy to divide women in our defense of all women. One of the biggest fault lines the radical right promotes is to separate women of color and white women.

My father was a first generation American, born with an apparent physical disability with only an elementary school education, due to the poverty his Sicilian mother with eight living children experienced as immigrants. He suffered discrimination, prejudice and bigotry throughout his life, for his disability and for his color. As his child I lived through many of those experiences. Because of him and because of the world of male violence... and the fear of it that we all live in, I experienced physical abuse as a child and learned how to defend myself and survive.

These were not the same experiences African people suffered in slavery in this country or throughout the vicious Jim Crow years to this day of police brutality and murder. Male violence and the fear of it are the basis of our shared abuse at the hands and minds of men. This is the intersection of oppressions.

We are on a lifetime journey to end male violence and the fear it instills in all of us and to end racism. This violence and fear uphold and enforces systems of oppression that harm us all—and will harm future
generations unless we put a stop to it now. NOW is embarked on a journey to expose racism and educated on ways to recognize white privilege and white supremacy. And to bring about its end.

As we are all capable of sexism, we are all capable of racism. We must recognize and accept this. We can’t help but be because we are born into a sexist, racist world. While this is not our personal fault we must recognize and accept it is our responsibility to dismantle these structural barriers to cultural and legal equality, if we truly want equality for all. This is what NOW stands for.

White women occupy a particular and privileged place in our society. But instead of dwelling in shame, guilt or regret, white women can resolve to be allies to women of color, using our location and privilege to provide space, to listen, hear and comprehend the horrific harm that racism visits on women of color and the systems of oppression that enforce it.

For example, today there are states that have removed polling places from predominantly black communities. In the last Presidential election, there was mass “cleansing” of voter rolls that impacted people of color and people whose names looked foreign. Voter suppression is on the rise today and threatens to steal another election for Trump.

We will not allow this to happen. We will work in feminist campaigns as volunteers. We will make phone calls to get the vote out, knock on doors, stuff envelopes and enter data, talk to voters, educate on the issues.

We will register voters, advocate for polling places in minority communities and on college campuses. We will give rides to the polls, and monitor polling places on Election Day, making sure the polling places don’t close down early, that registered voters are recognized and allowed to vote, making sure that their signatures are recognized. That is a part of our feminist agenda rising.

As feminists and allies, it is our obligation to uplift and support the lives of all women. Real feminism demands action. When we take action, we win. Understanding that inequality exists including and beyond the confines of gender is just the first step.

Feminism demands that we stand with our sisters even as we, ourselves may experience discomfort, denial and self-righteousness anger. It demands that we acknowledge our own privilege, even when it is difficult, and we are reluctant to do so.

We can’t talk about racial justice without talking about the disproportionate ways that racism affects women of color. Feminism goes deeper than demanding equality for women. We have got to take apart the oppressive systems that bring all of us down. Our oppressions are tied together, interlaced in a web of deception.
Demanding racial justice has been a part of NOW’s mission since its founding. NOW’s statement of purpose declares that we “take action through intersectional grassroots activism to promote feminist ideals, lead societal change, eliminate discrimination, and achieve and protect the equal rights of all women and girls in all aspects of social, political, and economic life.”

We recognize that different women from different communities’ experience challenges specific to their circumstances. For example, many African American women experience sexism within a context of challenges not shared by their white sisters — desegregated and under-resourced schools; the school-to-prison pipeline; racial disparities in wealth and health outcomes.

What’s more, many women of color experience race-based discrimination in the forms of egregious unequal pay, home loan redlining, racialized gender stereotyping, police brutality, and sexual violence. Intersectionality demands that we recognize each other’s unique struggles, working toward a shared vision of mutual respect and shared responsibilities.

Swift action is needed to begin healing the racism so deeply ingrained in the United States—and put an end to the steady stream of injustices people of color face. I hope that you have read the books “White Fragility” and “So you want to talk about Race” and even if you haven’t, I hope you will participate in our book club and racism workshops. This is one of the steps that we are taking to dismantle racism within our own organization.

If we don’t make noise, and make sure the national conversation continues, we can expect further horrific displays of white supremacy—and a deeper silence from politicians in Richmond, Washington and around the country who prize holding on to power—but not wielding it to advance enduring change. We must work to elect feminist women to office, to claim our power, to write and enact laws from a woman’s point of view, not the dominate male’s.

This our challenge. This our purpose. This is our resolve. I know what successful, transformative activism looks like, and looking around this room, I know this is exactly what we’ll do, transform our culture. This is our feminist agenda rising.