

**Speech by Mrs. Melinda French Gates
at Global Virtual Convocation of the Aga Khan University
Karachi, Pakistan, 22 May 2021**

Hello everyone. I am honored to join you today.

And thank you, Anita, for the kind introduction. Anita does an amazing job as the president of our Gender Equality Division and the director of our Vaccine Development programme at the Gates Foundation. Aga Khan University alums are represented at the highest levels of our Foundation!

I also want to thank His Highness the Aga Khan, Chairman Debas and the Board of Trustees, President Rasul and Provost Amrhein for inviting me today, and for their hard work in making Aga Khan University an exemplary institution.



From leading surveys on nutrition, and maternal and child health research in Pakistan and Kenya, to helping introduce multiple vaccines where they are so needed, Aga Khan University is not only a global resource – it is a transformative force for public health and women’s health.

So thank you to everyone who has worked to make AKU such a success – the administration, the faculty, and the many donors who have supported the University over the years.

Most of all, I want to congratulate today’s graduates on their impressive achievement, as well as the parents and relatives here today to share in this joyous occasion.

I particularly want to recognise the many who are the first in their family to earn a degree. Even though today is just one step in your journey, you have already accomplished an amazing feat.

Congratulations!

And I’m especially delighted to see a graduating class that is more than 70 per cent women.

As graduates of AKU, you join a remarkable group of women and men who are changing lives for the better all over the world. And let me tell you: the world desperately needs your energy and your leadership.

We are nearly a year and a half into the biggest global public health crisis in a century. And even as vaccines roll out, the pandemic still threatens millions of families across the planet.

And along with sickness and death, COVID-19 has disrupted economies and has shattered livelihoods. So after years of declines, poverty and hunger are on the rise. Basic, life-saving fundamentals of good health have become even harder to come by. Childhood vaccination rates were set back 25 years in just 25 weeks.

And women, who make up 70 per cent of the global health workforce, are bearing the brunt of the economic pain unleashed by this pandemic. Their jobs and economic security have been disproportionately devastated, even as they continue to handle most of the child and family care.

So let me be clear: The only way the world will rebound is by putting women at the centre of recovery efforts. And we need more leaders everywhere to make that case and act.

And that’s why I’m so inspired to be here today. You, the graduating class of 2021, are the leaders we need.

Wherever you go and whatever you choose to do with your degree, I have tremendous faith that you will be the architects of a better, fairer, and more equitable world.

We’re proud of our partnership with AKU over the years, including eradicating polio and other infectious diseases, improving maternal and child health and nutrition, reducing stillbirths, and, most recently, helping nurses respond to COVID-19.

I can’t wait to see the positive change you’ll bring. Congratulations, graduates. Let’s go out and make a better world.

Thank you.

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