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Hello esteemed guests. My name is Rekha Dhillon-Richardson. I stand here before you today as a student, a young woman, a daughter, an activist, an environmentalist, and most fundamentally, a human being.

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I was raised along the stunning coastline of British Columbia, Canada, where I developed a profound respect for the natural world. Even at a young age, I realized that the planet we live on is a beautiful and sacred gift that should not be taken for granted.

I continue to feel most inspired and empowered when I am in the natural world. It is in the raw beauty and diversity of our planet where I feel most calm. Most alive. These are places we need to protect for generations to come.

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As many great leaders, including Indigenous leaders, have pointed out, “Climate change IS the defining issue of our generation.” It is no longer an issue for the distant future. It is here.

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Just take a look at what has been happening in our world recently:

Fort McMurray, a small city in Alberta, home to the tar sands, burned to the ground from an unstoppable wildfire, displacing its residents and destroying homes, businesses, and wildlife.

Extreme floods in Louisiana are decimating modern infrastructure, damaging property, and taking lives. Jayden, a 13 year old victim of the recent Louisiana floods and plaintiff for Our Children’s Trust states, “A few weeks ago, I literally stepped out of my bed and was up to my ankles in climate change”.

Rising temperatures are becoming unbearable and even deadly. In fact, in India last summer, people couldn’t even walk across the pavement because their feet were sinking into the ground.

And next to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota, an oil company is trying to complete construction on a pipeline that would transport crude, fracked oil under one of the largest water tables in the world, the Missouri River.

We know that all of this will only worsen if we do not change our behaviors, our laws, and our relationship to nature. Everything is on the line. The human race seems to be under a preconceived notion that we are at the center of the world – the most important thing that matters. This is so wrong. The survival of our generation and future generations are facing imminent danger because of our individualism and deliberate inaction.

The scariest thing, perhaps of all, is that all we have to do to make this terrible climate nightmare a reality is absolutely nothing. In the West, we just have to continue living our high consumer and high carbon lifestyles. We have to continue to ignore the truth and abuse our privilege as citizens of this beautiful earth.

I just don’t understand. Throughout our lives, most of us have been taught to treat others and our surroundings with respect and not to take more than we need. Why do corporations believe they can endlessly extract resources from our planet without consequence? How could we *ever* rationalize the destruction of our home and the natural resources we depend on for survival?

Children across the globe have trusted all of you, the adults, to make the right decisions. To lead us forward into a cleaner and more just future for everyone. Unfortunately, seeing the rapid destruction of the planet right before my eyes, I can’t help but be direct and say...you are failing. The inaction around climate change is a colossal failure and a fundamental violation of the human rights of my generation and the generations that will follow me. Yes, everybody makes mistakes. But the onset of climate change is much bigger than a couple of mistakes. Our society is largely built upon colonialism, greed, wealth, and taking. Ignorance around the repercussions of our behavior is not an excuse.

Eventually, climate change will be irreversible. But not yet. I have hope. But we NEED to stop just talking and pretending. I urge you -- it is **imperative** that we start doing. Everyone here today holds a position of authority and with that the potential to do something really powerful.

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My human rights, and the rights of all children, can only be upheld if we make concrete changes. To do this we have to implement quantifiable greenhouse gas emission reductions that are *based in science*. Leading climate scientist James Hansen and many of his colleagues have provided a prescription for all nations on this planet to follow. A prescription for restoring the atmosphere, stabilizing the climate system, and protecting the oceans from acidification and warming. It requires us to return atmospheric carbon dioxide levels to below 350 parts per million by the end of the century and limiting the long-term temperature increase above pre-industrial temperatures to 1 degree Celsius. To my knowledge, the only government in the world that has adopted this scientific prescription for climate recovery into law is the city of Eugene, Oregon.

I believe it is absolutely crucial that youth are involved. I am standing here before you today speaking for all of the young people who could not be here.  The rights of children, in particular, are being disproportionately threatened by climate destabilization. We are the future leaders of this planet and we have a fundamental human right to a stable climate system.

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My generation is ready and willing to fight for our human rights and for the rights of our earth. In fact, we are already standing up:

Right now, 21 young people are suing the United States federal government for violating their constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property.

I am a part of Our Children’s Trust lawsuit against the Pennsylvania state government.

Both of these lawsuits emphasize the legal obligation of governments to their people to accept responsibility for their actions and become active participants in the solution instead of perpetrators of the problem.

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I have been active on these very issues since middle school. In 2012, at the age of 13,  I came before this very same body to speak on behalf of children everywhere about how urgent addressing climate change is to the successful protection of children’s human rights, much like right now.

At the convention, I was one of the only youth present, which surprised me. I asked myself, “Why aren’t kids given more of an opportunity to voice their opinions regarding issues that deeply affect them?”

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My experience at the United Nations in 2012 inspired me to take action. With the help and support of my high school, I organized the first Girls’ Climate Summit at our school in 2015. The mission of the summit is to strengthen the knowledge and leadership skills of young women who are passionate about the environment. I hosted the second annual Girls Climate Summit this year, attended by over 70 participants from over 16 different schools in the greater Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area.

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At the two annual Girls’ Climate Summits that I have hosted so far, I noticed something that I believe is fundamental to change: hope and education. When I looked at the girls who attended the conference, I saw unmistakable sparks of passion and inspiration. When you give youth a safe space to voice their perspectives, and prioritize their ideas in a real way, magical things can happen. Creative solutions emerge and we begin to see a different path forward.

You, people of this assembly, need to be willing to give the youth this safe and meaningful space to express their ideas, instead of marginalizing our perspectives to the sidelines. In order to alter the trajectory of climate change, we need everybody to be involved, especially the generation that is going to inherit the consequences of harmful decisions that were made without our authorization.

I may be only seventeen. But that doesn’t mean that my rights are not important and my knowledge and experiences aren’t valuable. It’s time for governments around the world to put the future of young people above the short term economic interests of big corporations. It is time for youth to have a permanent and powerful place at the table. Help us in this fight.

Stand in solidarity with us. And most importantly, act now to make these changes real.  Thank you.