Thank you for your invitation here this afternoon and could I wish you all a happy International Women’s Day slightly in advance.

I want to begin by confessing that I am somewhat of an impostor; I actually did my primary degree in UCD and my H Dip in Education here, so I suppose I can just about scrape in to today’s session. I remember in fact that the first thing I saw on day one in Belfield was a blackboard with just two words written on it: Trinity Rejects, but I have managed to come to terms with that over the years and as my darling eldest daughter is a freshman here I can slide in on her coat tails as well.

Anyway I'm supposed to be here to talk a bit about myself which is very nice but I'd like to start by talking about you and the young student women in particular. The fact that you're all here today in Trinity means that you've already made a huge success of the first two decades of your lives. But as women, you've probably got another 6 of those decades ahead of you and I sincerely hope that you intend making a success out of each and every one of them. God, or someone, or something, gifted you all with brains and ambition and he or she is not about to turn off the tap on either of those attributes whenever you decide to conceive if you are fortunate enough to do so.

As someone who entered the workforce in the early 1980s, before most of you were born, I still find it shocking to see the continued minimal presence of women in so many key areas of our national life. In this morning's Irish Times, the latest figures show that a paltry 13% of TDs are women; just 8% of board members are women and there continues to be a huge, 17.1% gap in the pay rates as between women and men.

It strikes me, that at a certain point, despite huge academic success, the acquisition of stellar degrees and other qualifications, women begin to drop out of public life - and by that I mean paid employment whether within the private or public sector. And those that choose to remain there, at a high level - would appear to do so at some personal cost. Research carried out by Trinity's own Dr Maryann Valulis demonstrates this rather starkly.

Dr Valulis said last week that research carried out on women in the Civil Service has shown that those who make it to the top are more likely than their male colleagues not to be married and not to have children.
She said "As women progress up the career ladder, you can see the statistical impact very clearly. At junior management level, 41 per cent of men have children, and women are higher at 59 per cent. At middle management level, 62 per cent of men have children, whereas women have dropped to 38%. And then, by senior management, 79 percent of men have children, but the number of female senior managers with children is just 21 percent."

Clearly the having of children is an issue, but I don't think it's the only issue, I do think that some of the glass ceilings are self imposed or perhaps too many women take too much notice of the censorious commentary that we still get about working outside the home. I seem to have spent far too much time over the years reading endless articles about women and working and women and mothers and women and families and the agonising choices that we're all supposed to have to make and the damage we're supposed to be doing to our children or our menfolk if we do abandon the kitchen for the workplace. One minute we're heroic superwomen, the next we're ballbreaking harridans. My advice to you is to read that stuff if you want and then quickly turn the page. Whatever you choose to do will never be universally approved of, so don't map out your lives on the basis of random bits of pop psychology and the thinly veiled misogyny of many of those who pen it.

One of my children has told me that I don't cook enough or clean enough and would clearly prefer me to be at home all the time. Yet, a dear friend of mine, who also has five children, and has never worked outside the home is occasionally told by her children that she should get a job. Believe me, you can't win.

To me, the most extraordinary thing about that forest load of analysis is that I, personally, never, not for a single moment in my adult life, ever once agonised about the choices I would make as between my personal and professional life even though the newspapers would have it that we're all constantly worrying about what we should and should not be doing. It never once crossed my mind that I wouldn't work outside the home, it never once crossed my mind that I wouldn't have a family, although I never really thought I'd be fortunate enough to have five children. I think, in large part, my inability to visualise any path other than a combined family and work life had the single greatest impact on my life. If you can't see a problem, how therefore can it exist?

I went to a very ordinary national school in west Dublin, followed by a very ordinary convent school in the same place, followed by UCD and Trinity. I did not want to be a teacher, so after a year in France, I came home, walked into the then equivalent of a FÁS office and told them that I wanted to be a journalist. In France I had reflected that everything and everybody that had engaged me as a child and teenager connected with that. I loved politics, was very curious, was a good writer and
enjoyed gossip enormously. The fact that I was also very shy, had never had the courage even to write for a college magazine, and had zilch track record therefore in journalism, was not, to my mind, an impediment.

The interviewer obviously thought differently, urged me to learn to type, so that in due course I might, she said, become a production assistant in RTE. I declined. I reckoned that if I never learned to type, then I’d never get a job typing and that suited me just fine. In the end, they put me on a career development course, which included work experience and I got my first job in journalism editing the short stories and writing about mushrooms for Woman's Way magazine. Shortly afterwards I got a placement with the Sunday Tribune, they kept me on and there began twenty incredibly exciting, rewarding, fulfilling, fun years in journalism. I wrote a number of books, worked on radio and TV, won a fellowship to Harvard, had the five children and then in 2003 was appointed Ombudsman and Information Commissioner.

I tend to have a habit of saying that none of that was any big deal. Part of that is the female thing of not seeing anything one does as being as mind-blowingly brilliant as the boys would if they were doing it. Last year I was honoured by the NUI with a Doctorate and I sat on the podium in Dublin Castle for about 45 minutes, as my Fellow graduands were introduced and their CVs detailed at length, agonising over what my introducer was going to say about me. Would it all be embarrassingly short I wondered, how could she possibly keep going for five minutes about my career?

Well, God Bless you Dr Mary Corcoran, you did and I was immensely flattered and grateful and curious too about how someone can put shape on your life when, as you were living it yourself, did not appear particularly shapely.

In hindsight, many of the decisions I made, almost unconsciously, were the right ones to make if you do intend to marry work with a largish family. In journalism, I chose a career that I was good at, which helps if you want to get paid a decent amount of money and enjoy yourself at the same time; it was also flexible, in that my employers didn’t care if I was breastfeeding in a basement while writing my columns as long as I wrote the damn things; I have never once had a clock in clock out kind of job and as any working outside the home mother will tell you, flexibility is the key to everything. I married a man who was quite happy for me to take the career lead as long as he could go fishing with his mates once in June and once in September; I employed older women as childminders who became like the children’s extended family and one of whom still baby-sits for me to this day. I was never conscious of mentors as such; I think journalism might be different in that it can be quite a solitary profession and the need to network might not be as great as it is in more structured professions. Certainly, there were editors who were inspiring and encouraging and that was certainly helpful.
There were times of course that were not so great; I left one particular job a month before my fifth child was born; the telephone was not ringing off the hook with job offers, and I was being gently told by my nearest and dearest that perhaps my full time working days were over. I was 42. It was an extremely tough time, but I knew that I couldn't, wouldn't accept what some people might have thought was an end point. So I went back out, regained full time employment and did not look back. The lesson I took from that low point was that in the end it is entirely down to yourself to pick yourself up off the floor and get on with it. You can moan to family and friends as much as you want, but your own attitude will entirely dictate what happens next.

As young women, you have your lives ahead of you. There may be a recession, but the generation of successful women before you went through recessions too and came out the other end. I hope that my own daughters will have happy and fulfilled home and work lives. I wish above all that they will be happy and loved I have been loved. I tell them, or at least I have told the oldest one, that as human beings, we have a duty to impact not just one the domestic but on the public. I love my children more than anything else on this earth, but we as women also need to have concern for other people's children, for the people in this world who need our skills and talents. I am aware that in recent years there has been a bit of a cup cake revolution and many women have succumbed to the alleged charms of the island in the kitchen; that too has its place but its not the only place and cup cakes are very, very fattening.

Every woman has different needs, fulfilled in different ways. Some do want to devote themselves full time to their children. But children grow up and women need to plan for what lies ahead when that once big noisy house lies empty. Some work out their salvation through part time work or voluntary work. Others need the adrenaline rush of the full on, high flying career and that too is their choice.

But we all need to be rational. The economy dictates much of our well being, and to use my mother in laws phrase, having your running away money is a very good idea, particularly nowadays when marriages aren't as stable as they once were.

I also think we need to change the way in which we speak of these things. One thing that drives me insane is the phrase work/life balance. Last week we all supposedly celebrated work life balance day. What drives me mad is the assumption in that phrase that your work is not part of your life, or that work is the horrible bit and life is the fun part. Yet if you work full time, your work is a huge part of your life.

I believe that instead of thinking about careers and jobs in one box, and family and children in another, we should instead think about what impact we want to make on
the world during our lifetime. Do we want to cleave solely to the domestic, gifting ourselves only to those within our family circle, or do we embrace a wider world, a world with enormous problems but also enormous pleasures, the former that we can help to solve, the latter that we can simply enjoy.

You, the students, are here in one the world's best Universities. Your fortune is great, your abilities already recognised, your possibilities endless. Please dream, please plan, please leave a large, wonderful footprint on this planet.

In conclusion, I read a recent review of a new book called Backwards in High Heels, a book about the issues I've touched on today. The title comes from a remark made about the dancer and actress Ginger Rogers. For many years, in movies, she partnered Fred Astaire who was lauded for his dancing talent. But Fred of course, danced in a forward motion and in flat heels. Ginger did it backwards and in high heels. The point the authors make is that it's so much more difficult for women to achieve or to be recognised. But what I take from all of that is that Ginger did it effortlessly, gracefully, beautifully and magnificently. And so can all of you. The only person that can stop you from doing so is yourself.