

Copy of the President's Speech
Alumnae Weekend: 24 September 2022

Hello. It's a great pleasure to see so many of you here in person – I hope you are enjoying the day . And welcome to those of you who are watching virtually.

I've been fortunate to be President for a year now and I am pleased to say there are many familiar faces among you. I have been grateful for your tremendous support for the college and for me as I have found my way in my new role. I knew before I arrived that the financial support which you as alumnae gave the college was key to the all we did and the support we could give students. What I have discovered over this year is all the other ways in which you help students – with careers advice, internships and generous amounts of your valuable time. Above all, what you have achieved in your lives is their inspiration. I realise that you as alumnae are as much a part of our community as students, fellows and staff. Thank you. And thank you to all of you who have given me feedback on our newsletters with your thoughts and ideas. Please keep that coming.

This has been a year of change and development for us. At last, we emerged from the strictures of Covid and students could begin to enjoy their college and university experience to the full. They achieved great success academically – with more than 89% gaining good honours degrees. Murray Edwards is, I am assured by the JCR, seen as a 'cool college'. I can attest it has a great social life in the evenings and, with your help, our new daytime Art Café is about to open as a destination for study and relaxation. Thanks to a very generous £1 million gift from Christina and Peter Dawson, we are setting up a new wellbeing service which will give all students support in ensuring their study is not at the expense of their health.

This term, the college will admit the highest proportion ever of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. 25.9% of our students come from backgrounds with indices of multiple deprivation - and we also have our first five students on the Foundation Year. Many of you have told me that widening participation is of great importance to you. I am delighted that we have become the first Cambridge College to appoint a full-time professionally experienced Head of Access and Student Recruitment. This appointment is a mark of how determined we are to reach out to students from diverse backgrounds who might never have expected to go to Cambridge.

I am grateful to those of you who have supported our Haringey experiment in working with school students to offer them academic support and encouragement. Thanks to you, two of our fellows and a group of our students have been working with comprehensive school students in their first year of A Level, including lectures, advice and setting up a summer reading group.

I am also very pleased to say that we have appointed our first ever Director of Student Development to run an expanded Gateway student support scheme. Your donations and the huge amount of time you give have been crucial to its success. All students will receive more help but we will be able to give additional support to students who come from schools which may not have been able to teach them the sorts of study, research and writing skills required

at Cambridge. We now give our students unrivalled levels of support outside their academic subject studies.

I am also grateful to those of you who have supported the Bridging Project which will give extra support to a number of students this year. Eight students will get personal coaching over the whole of their first year.

Your support is vital in all our endeavours. Of course, the financial support you provide for students is more valued than ever as our nation's economy faces great challenges.

Some people say that there is no longer a role for women's institutions and organisations. Some said that to me before I came here. Of course, the status of the college is ultimately decided by the Governing Body, consulting with you as alumnae and others. But I disagree fundamentally with the notion that a women's college is an outdated institution. I think a women's college is a brilliant exemplar of a different way for women to study. It is something which came from the past, when women couldn't enter men's colleges, which has a new and exciting purpose in the present. Until women achieve true equality in society, institutions which support women are needed and can be of great use. They can both support women in specific ways and they can speak up for women and help ensure their voices are heard in policy debates and their rights championed in the corridors of power.

I love this place. There's nothing quite like it in the whole of the United Kingdom. When I arrived, it was students who told me how much they valued this college as a women's institution which includes and welcomes men as fellows, staff and visitors. Most strikingly they told me how restful they found it as a place where they were not, as they put it, 'on display' or 'on show'. Those were their words. I found them chilling. They say the college gives them a break from a culture in society which is not always friendly to women. They can invite men here, and to stay the night here, on their terms in a place where women are in control. Some who study STEM subjects all day in departments where they are still in a minority, say it's good to come back to a place where they are in a majority. Later in this speech, I will talk about research on the extraordinary pressure girls and young women feel under when they are outside the home – and the high levels of sexual harassment school and university students face. Our college provides a space where those challenges are understood and where we don't just offer a break from what is basically a form of female oppression but work to end that sort of harassment.

We are fortunate that because of the Dawsons' generosity we will be setting up what will be an outstanding service under our first Head of Wellbeing Dr Susan Imrie, for our students, linking to the university's improved services. Our wellbeing service can be a first port of call for a student who is anxious or feeling low. But we want to support all our students. Cambridge is a challenging environment. Help and advice on good sleeping habits, workshops on balancing studies with exercise, relaxation and healthy eating; these are vital in fending off problems. Of course, we will play a leading role in debates about whether too much is expected in students in some subjects. Are some workloads just too heavy? I am concerned my statistics from the Office of National Statistics which indicate that 37% of first year university students in England suffer some form of depression. That's much higher than in non-students of their age where just over a fifth suffer depression. I can see that leaving home

can be stressful but young people embarking on a new adventure – one which will bring them more opportunities in life - ought to feel excited, not worried and low. Universities need to examine their consciences and their practices.

Here at Murray Edwards, we are lucky. In many ways our lives here in College exemplify the notions of holistic living. We live in wonderful Grade II* buildings which contain our inspiring collection of women's art, the biggest in Europe. We have beautiful gardens where, unlike some other colleges, our students can not only walk on the grass but lie on it, pick the flowers and grow vegetables and herbs. Students are taught in small groups by brilliant and devoted academics who are leaders in their fields. But we are not immune to the pressures outside and I have thought a great deal about the role we should play in wider society in promoting the interests of girls and young women.

I believe there is a crisis in the wellbeing of girls and young women – a crisis that has not been recognised. And I believe we have a duty, as a unique institution of higher education for women, to promote debate and discussion on the issues they face. This crisis is central to the lives of our own students, affecting them both before they enter and while they are here. So we cannot ignore it.

Our college is almost 70 and this year I myself became 70. Reaching three score years and ten and assuming the role of President of a woman's college has led me to think a lot about the position of women today. The story of women in the UK and the West is generally told as one of relentless advance in rights and in status. Here at Cambridge, for example, women were prohibited from being awarded degrees until 1948. The fiftieth anniversary of the first women to be admitted to all-male colleges is being celebrated this year. In 2021, there were more female undergraduates than male. Fifteen out of 31 heads of house are now women – we are on the verge of being in the majority. That's how the story of women is so often told ; the story our relentless rise. Women on boards, heading up companies, running major public organisations. Articles appear saying men feel they are now the ones suffering prejudice. Hey, we even have a female prime minister – our country's third.

I believe that deeper analysis shows that in many ways life today for girls and young women is much worse than when I was young. I also think that the problems girls and young women suffer are perceived as being their personal problems to be dealt with individually with therapy for mental distress or diets for physical problems. But while these problems present through individuals, they are issues for society to fix. Society has let down girls and young women. Indeed, I believe our society has betrayed the hopes of girls and young women. We have squandered the advances that feminists fought for and achieved. The rights women have won have been rendered hollow in meaning to the huge numbers of girls and young women who are suffering levels of depression, self-hatred and despair which frighten me.

It starts so young. When I was a child of six, I never thought about my self-image or my body; I just lived my life. Research here at Cambridge, led by Dr Terri Apter, suggests that concerns over weight now start as young as six. Half of six year old girls questioned said they wished they were three sizes smaller. The problem is prevalent in the US too. The National Organisation for Women found 53% of girls said they were unhappy with their bodies, rising to 78% by the age of 17.

We talk about reining in the power of social media but I see far too little change despite the fact the social media giants privately accept responsibility. In March 2020, internal research by Facebook, owners of Instagram, was leaked. Here is some of what it said, '32% of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse'. And, in the words of Facebook itself, 'Teens blame Instagram for increases in the rate of anxiety and depression'. 13% of UK users of Instagram reported suicidal thoughts which they themselves traced back to Instagram. In the US it was 6%.

Eating disorders were rare in my childhood and so was obesity. Today, according to the National Child Measurement Programme in England, more than 10% of girls aged 4-5 are obese. More than 20% of girls aged 10-11 are obese. So, should we blame those individual girls and their parents? Or should we ask questions about why the powerful food industry is allowed to advertise junk food in popular family programmes and successive governments water down obesity strategies – we read now that our new government is about to abandon Boris Johnson's obesity strategy. Newspapers berate parents for failing to cook for their children but how many children are taught to cook at school as I was? Of course it was wrong that in my day only girls learned to cook but the answer to that sexism shouldn't have been to drop cookery lessons. I can't think of a more important subject to teach in an obesity crisis.

Meanwhile eating disorders in girls and young women are rife. NICE says 90% of those with eating disorders are female. A 2018 study found that 15% of young women in High Income countries have eating disorders.

I know that this might seem like a litany of despair but please bear with me just a little longer because a key issue I want to highlight is that statistics about the problems of girls and young women are too often presented separately. We will read one day about obesity, the next about self-image, the next about depression and anxiety, then about bulimia, then about suicide. The problems are not linked to each other. Just this week, I read statistics on anxiety in young people on one page of a national newspaper and, when I turned over, figures on the obesity crisis presented as a separate problem.

This dividing off of issues is particularly true of sexual harassment and assault which are generally treated as a quite separate problems to the issues I have just listed. But how can they NOT be linked? If you are constantly denigrated and humiliated, why would you feel good about yourself and your body? In the 2017 Girls Attitude Survey commissioned by Girlguiding, 64% of girls and young women aged 13 to 21 said they had experienced sexual harassment at school, college or university in the last year. The admirable campaign Everyone's Invited, launched in 2020, highlighted widespread sexual abuse at school. There have been more than 50,000 submissions to its website, detailing girls' experience of what has been called a 'rape culture' in schools and colleges. Soma Sara, one of its leaders, says in her new book that teenage girls' experience of sex is 'saturated with shame, embarrassment, humiliation and pain'. She blames the ubiquity of hardcore porn. A government survey found most children aged 16-17 had viewed pornography they found disturbing or aggressive. Many said that this pornography had influenced their behaviour.

And it doesn't go away just because a young woman goes away to university. Cambridge University students made national headlines last year when they complained about a spate of spiking of drinks in clubs. And I know we were all shocked at International Women's Day this year when some of our own students described being frightened to go out at night. One said that harassment is so common, students don't even bother telling each other when they have suffered it.

So when we think about all the problems assailing young women, we shouldn't be surprised by how bad they say they feel. 26% of young women experience a common mental health disorder – more than three times as many as young men. The rate of self-harm among young women is twice that of young men. The NSPCC says that 72% of those in suicide counselling are girls. Just this week, the British Journal of Psychiatry published a major study showing that in just a ten year period, from 2008 to 2018, the percentage of women aged 18 to 24 found to have generalised anxiety disorder had nearly quadrupled from 8% to 30% and note, that was before the pandemic. So many girls and young women are deeply troubled and we should be deeply troubled too. We need to have deeper conversations about the needs of girls and young women.

I want to be clear the past was not a great place to be a woman. When I was at school, if a girl became pregnant, she had no right to abortion, even if she had been raped. The pill became available to single women only in my first year at university. The first film I produced and directed on network television was about rape in marriage – then not a crime. A man could be prosecuted only for injuries inflicted during the rape. Building societies denied mortgages to women. Women have fought for their rights over the last fifty years and won extraordinary victories. But we need to recognise that while rights and status are vital to health, happiness and success in life, they are no guarantee of health, happiness and success in life.

We need to be clear that while young people of all genders face many of the same problems; girls and young women face specific problems which should be examined in their own right. I believe they are being let down utterly. The levels of misery and physical and emotional ill-health are terrifying. For me, as a feminist, I am sometimes overwhelmed by disappointment.

But something can be done. And we at Murray Edwards want to be part of looking for solutions. We plan to make Murray Edwards a Policy Centre for the Wellbeing of Girls and Young Women where ideas are highlighted, debated, and discussed. We are fortunate indeed to be here at Cambridge University where some of the best research relevant to these problems is being carried out.

To cite just a little of the great work going on here: Sarah-Jayne Blakemore's studies of the teenage brain; Tamsin Ford's work on the mental health of children and adolescents; the work of the Family Research Centre. Academics at Cambridge, like Professor of Psychiatry Edward Bullmore are highlighting the false dichotomy between physical and mental health. One of the most exciting adventures in the city is the planned Cambridge Children's Hospital, which will be the first facility of its kind purpose-built to fully integrate physical and mental healthcare for children and young people. The hospital aims to show the benefits of integrated care applied to eating disorders, self harm and a range of chronic physical health condition that cause mental health vulnerabilities.

I know from decades making television programmes that brilliant ideas created at universities often don't reach the wider public and we want to help bring some of the great thinking here in Cambridge and at other institutions to wider attention. Over time, we would like to be part of commissioning research. There are still many gaps in our understanding of the problems of girls and young women – and what might help them.

We also want to engage with policy makers. I think most of us here would think it was good news that Liz Truss this week reversed her decision to scrap the role of Minister for Women and appointed Katherine Fletcher. We would like to engage with her and her counterparts in other parties as well as relevant charities and organisations. Some charities have called for there to be a specific government policy on the mental health problems of girls and young women. The brilliant success of England's Women's Football team have made many consider how improved school sport for girls could improve physical and mental health. I'm not the only person who bangs on about the need for proper cookery lessons in schools. And the country is, as far as I can see, united in calling for much tighter controls on social media. There are so many great ideas to be brought to the fore. We can be part of leading the fightback against the negativity girls and young women feel about themselves

Here at Murray Edwards we have always done more than give brilliant young women a brilliant education. We have aimed to empower them. I believe our own students will benefit immensely from us bringing to the college leading academics and policy makers from Cambridge and beyond to engage in exciting world-class debate about changing society for the better. And I hope you will join us too.

Our new students are about to arrive. We will do everything we can to ensure that are successful in their studies – AND happy, healthy and balanced young women.