It is wonderful to join with you during Women’s History Month to celebrate the tremendous leadership and accomplishments of women here on campus.

And I feel privileged to have the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with you today.

In 1970, I matriculated at Princeton University -- in the second year of co-education. Women were perhaps one-fourth of the undergraduates, and there were 200 African American students out of about 4500.

I had done well in math in high school and on the Math Advanced Placement test, so I enrolled in an advanced Algebra class in the Fall of my first year. There were about 60 students--only about 10% were women, and I was the only Black student.

Math had always been one of my favorite subjects, but that all changed in this class. I looked around at the other students and felt very different from them. They seemed "nerdy, geeky" to me, and I didn't see myself that way. I didn't make any effort to connect with any of my peers or to join any informal study groups.

The course material was really difficult. I'd always had a lot of confidence in my math abilities, but that collapsed pretty quickly. I felt like I was in over my head. The professor -- of course, a White male -- seemed nice enough, but somehow I was too intimidated to seek him out outside of class -- to ask for help or guidance. I felt alone, alienated, and out of my league. I scraped my way through -- disenchanted and disengaged -- glad to eke out a C+ at the end of the semester. Never to take a math class again. This experience was emblematic of my life at
Princeton. Though I ultimately managed to excel academically, I never felt like I fully belonged or like it was really my university.

Forty-two years have passed, and although my Princeton experience was distinguished by the fact that the university was largely male and very, very White, this experience mirrors that of far too many women students, staff and faculty today. And of course, these difficulties are exacerbated for women of color, for women who are sexual or religious or ability minorities, for women from economically disadvantaged or working class backgrounds.

Now, it's true, we've made significant strides in academia. We've come a long way since 1970.

Nationally, 58% of undergraduate students are women.

Women students earn better grades than men.

We are more likely than men to complete college.

And we're earning 59% of master’s degrees and 49% of doctoral degrees.

BUT women students continue to be underrepresented in the STEM disciplines, particularly at the graduate level.

AND women undergraduates report higher levels of stress and lower levels of self-confidence than men.

The gap in confidence is already in play as men and women enter college, and it only widens during the college years.

In terms of faculty, nationally, women are now half of the full-time faculty in 2-year public colleges; 41% in 4-year and master's level institutions, BUT only one-third in research universities.

AND women faculty are poorly represented in the physical sciences, computer science, math, and engineering, YET significantly overrepresented in non-tenure track positions, which are less secure, pay less well, and are less prestigious.
And when we look outside the academy, we also see good news and bad:

The median salary of women who work full-time is 80% of that of men.

Women continue to face rampant sexual harassment and sexual violence. One in four US college women report having survived rape or attempted rape.

On the other hand, it’s remarkable that after decades of discussion and consideration, we now have national health care reform, that will provide much-needed access to affordable healthcare for millions of Americans, including many economically challenged women and their children. That is, unless the Supreme Court -- that is meeting as I speak -- messes it up by ruling against the individual mandate.

Ironically, the victory of healthcare reform has been followed by a legislative war on women’s health—

A number of states have passed laws requiring medically unnecessary ultrasound procedures prior to having an abortion. Some states, including Virginia and Alabama, have considered requiring transvaginal ultrasounds, though so far, they've backed down in response to the public firestorm.

In 2011 nine states reduced funding for family planning programs -- the net effect is that many economically disadvantaged and working class women have lost their access to gynecological care – often preventive care.

And I'm sure that you heard Rush Limbaugh call a Georgetown Law student a “slut” and say that if she wants “taxpayers to pay for her to have sex”, she should post her sex videos online so all can watch.

The Guttmacher Institute recently reported that half of all US women live in states that are hostile to abortion -- where women are forced to jump through hoops to get an abortion. In the year 2000, 30% of all states were considered hostile to abortion, so there’s been a big uptick. It's the new strategy to undo Roe v. Wade. A chip, chip, chipping away at abortion rights, at women's rights.

This is a time of great contradictions:
Forty years after the Women's Movement, we have gained tremendous ground, but there are signs of retrenchment all around.

It's a time when many of our younger sisters have grown up with a take-it-for-granted attitude towards women's issues and a belief that feminism is a fringe, superfluous ideological perspective; yet it's a time when, perhaps more than ever, we need to be vigilant, hypervigilant, about women’s issues, women’s rights, women’s empowerment.

We’re moving forward, but the backlash is stronger than it’s been in years, perhaps decades.

What's striking about 2012 is how much blatant, overt, in-your-face sexism we have to contend with --how much outright misogynistic, anti-woman crap keeps flying our way.

I've shared examples of the blatant form of bigotry-- the obvious, easily identified, readily named biases. But there’s also subtle sexism – just below the surface, often not noticed, because it’s accepted, “normal”, customary. These days we're forced to contend with both the blatant and the subtle.

Let me spend a little time talking about this.

Subtle gender bias, sometimes called “modern sexism”, is less dramatic, less showy than the blatant form, but it can still be very damaging, and I believe, it's much of what we contend with in the academy.

Subtle sexism is often manifested in the culture and climate of the university -- in women's experiences of marginalization or dismissal or exclusion. It may not be any one thing that any one person says or does on any one day. It's part of the landscape.

Sometimes subtle sexism takes the form of micro-inequities – little, needling everyday interactions where women are treated differently, dismissively.

Some examples:
• Being viewed as a troublemaker for asking questions, yet similar behavior by men is seen as a sign of their curiosity and forward thinking
• Getting the message that being a mom is a disadvantage, that it’ll get in the way of professional life; whereas male colleagues are lauded for their devotion to their children.
• Being asked to do traditional female tasks that are outside of the job description, for ex., making the coffee
• Being called by a first name, even though male colleagues are called Mr. or Dr.
• Being called “honey” or “sweetie”— terms which serve to diminish, marginalize, infantilize.
• Getting attention for one's physical appearance –getting the message that a woman’s beauty is more important than her brains. I bet you that Hillary’s tired of the analyses of her hairstyles and I’m sure that Michelle’s weary of the constant “should she or shouldn’t she?” wear sleeveless tops.

Individually, once or twice, none of these micro-inequities is horrible. One might ask: “What’s the big deal?” Well, there’s evidence that the accumulation of these micro-inequities can cripple us. It’s the torturous drip, drip, drip – the cumulative effect. It’s the quiet yet insidious message that’s conveyed about women’s capacity, intellect, and contributions.

What makes subtle sexism so challenging is that it’s often a reflection of unconscious biases – Subtle sexism is often perpetrated by well-meaning men AND women, serving well-meaning institutions, who absolutely believe that they are egalitarian and that they support the full development and inclusion of women.

If they’re called out on their micro-inequitable behavior, they’re likely to tell you that you misunderstood them, that you got it wrong, that they don’t have a biased bone in their body. Or they might be so mortified, so ashamed, that the opportunity to unpack the incident and learn from it is lost.
That’s what makes subtle sexism so pernicious. The perpetrators aren’t card-carrying sexists; they don’t want to be sexists; but they come by it honestly. After all, they grew up on this planet.

Subtle sexists might be politically liberal. They might be the progressive instructor, the well-meaning Department Chair; the knowledgeable supervisor; the enterprising graduate assistant. They come in all genders. And sadly, even those of us who are committed feminists aren’t immune to being perpetrators.

For us as women -- Subtle bias sometimes shows up when we have the opportunity to support other women or to follow women’s leadership, but we don’t.

And it rears its head when we diminish our own talent, skills, capacity -- when we come to believe that we’re not good enough, that we don’t have anything to contribute, that we can’t excel.

Claude Steele, a social psychologist, has studied the impact that negative stereotypes have on women and people of color. In a now classic set of experiments, he brings in women and men undergraduates who have done equally well in equally challenging college math courses, and he asks them to take a math test. The women on average perform more poorly than the men.

However, if you bring in another group of women and you first tell them: “On this math test, there are no gender differences in performance; women do as well as men”. The result? The women perform as well as the men. Why is this?

The explanation is what Steele calls “stereotype threat” – that when marginalized groups are aware of negative stereotypes, for example, the notion that women aren’t good at math, that this awareness consumes their attention and gets in the way of their performance, thus confirming the stereotype. Similar studies have found similar effects with African American students -- for example, when Black students, aware of the negative stereotypes about Black intelligence, take a test of cognitive ability.
The notion of stereotype threat focuses our attention on what Steele calls the "threat in the air". It's not a specific, discrete act of sexism or racism; it's the impact of living in a land where stereotypes and biases are rife -- they're floating all around us.

"Stereotype threat" may help to explain my own difficulty in the math class at Princeton.

However, the good news is that it’s possible to counter the stereotype, sometimes as simply as by directly conveying an alternate message: “There are no gender differences on this math test.”

We need to re-double our efforts to convey an alternate message – to ourselves, to our younger sisters, to our brothers, and to our legislators.

We need to address both blatant and subtle sexism. This requires political, policy, programmatic, and psychological work. We need legislation that is sane and affirming and empowering of women. We need academic policies and programs that will help to level the playing field and provide opportunities for women to excel on a par with men – things like affirmative action that is once again being threatened, like equitable compensation and family leave and childcare support. AND we need to capture the hearts and minds of those who, in big ways and small, and often unintentionally, perpetuate inequity.

Fortunately, we're not alone in this work. We have each other -- feminist women and men who are committed to fighting for the full empowerment of women.

This Commission plays a critically important role in keeping us collectively focused on gender disparities and the experiences of women on our campus and getting us to "do the right thing" to realize our university's vision of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

And we're part of a worldwide struggle for women's rights, for human rights, for social justice -- from women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo -- who're battling the use of rape as a weapon of war TO women in Mexico who are standing up to the cartels that are trafficking women TO the many mothers who
are speaking out about the disturbing killing of 17 year old Trayvon Martin. Our work is linked to theirs and theirs to ours.

In the scheme of things, we are a group with significant financial and educational privilege and with substantial political freedom, and I believe that we have a responsibility to not only look within our gates, but also to consider ways that we can foster freedom and justice for women everywhere.

I am very grateful to be engaged in this important work with all of you. And it is inspiring to be able to look to the Outstanding Women of our campus who are trailblazers, role models, and leaders in this mission.

Thank you.