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Building Sisterhood Sketch of a Living Concept

You're not alone! You're not alone! You're not alone!
It was all of us! It was all of us! It was all of us!
Touch one and we'll all answer!

Slogans like these, among many others, sing out in our country's feminist marches. The masses shout these slogans especially when a single demonstrator speaks in public, writes or paints on a monument

or the street, or is apprehended by the police. The rest of the women marchers show their solidarity, empathy, and compassion for the sisters through their songs. They enter into a wave that embraces the differences among women, that envelops them in an identity and turns them into a single force: feminism. Throughout history, feminist women have dedicated themselves to constructing that common space, the safe space of understanding and mutual support among women that today we can call sisterhood.

For feminism, the notion of sisterhood is a shared understanding of the structural causes that put women at a relative disadvantage *vis-à-vis* men. Solidarity and empathy are fundamental for understanding the conditions that limit other women's actions, positions, and experi-

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ences. This understanding can be expected first and especially from women themselves, since, taking into account the differences in their lives, and although to a different extent, all of us are oppressed by the same patriarchal structure. This very comprehension, empathy, and accompaniment is what has allowed us to exist and resist down through history, as well as to consolidate our feminist movement that has demanded rights and freedoms for more than 200 years.

The concept of sisterhood arose out of feminist groups in the second half of the twentieth century. Groups for reflection, mutual support, and dialogue organized by feminist women allowed them to express the thoughts and feelings that were not understood by people around them, particularly men. These groups made women feel heard, understood, and accompanied. They became aware of the importance of solidarity and support among women in feminism, since we are the ones who know where we have come from, what social structures limit us, and can understand what our peers experience. Thus, without necessarily implying friendship, sisterhood emerges as a way of behaving among women based on the understanding of the patriarchal structures that limit our bodies and condition our behavior. It is a rejection of the patriarchal, misogynistic discourse that establishes competition and confrontation among women as our natural state.

Because of the experiences shared in consciousness-raising groups, and given the need for a space for understanding and empathy, feminist women coined the concept of sisterhood (*sororidad* in Spanish; *sororité* in French; *sororità* in Italian). In the book *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (literally, Don't Think You Have Rights), the Women's Bookstore of Milan presents a series of chapters that develop the importance of women accompanying each other for their own emancipation and self-awareness. The writers from the cooperative, active since 1975, lay out the creation of the first formal feminist collectives in Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.

This need for a space of one's own created by and for women is based on the recognition that the first step for bringing down patriarchal structures is to think of oneself from the standpoint of a non-patriarchal structure, develop authentic thinking of women for women. And this must be done from inside relationships, alliances, and accompaniment that recognize and accept the differences among women, understand the oppressions that limit us, and promote the emancipation of each and every one of us.

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For her part, the U.S.-American feminist theorist bell hooks, in her *Feminism Is for Everybody*, maintains that women's unity is prohibited by patriarchal norms, which imbues them with internalized misogyny. Through the quest for spaces and attitudes that fostered cooperation and alliances among women, feminism attacked patriarchal judgments among women and disarmed the sexist thinking drilled into them. For hooks, our emancipation arises out of the alliance with each other based on the recognition in solidarity of our differences; that is, feminist sisterhood is rooted in the shared commitment to fight against patriarchal injustice, regardless of the form it takes.² Thus, the starting point for sisterhood is recognizing that, regardless of class and ethnic limitations, all women are limited first of all by the patriarchal structure itself, although in different ways and to differing degrees.

In her contribution to Mexican and Latin American feminist theory, researcher Marcela Lagarde refers to the concept of sisterhood as a political position and attitude. It is political in that it puts forward an alternative *modus operandi* to the one dictated by the patriarchal order. It is a new way of conceiving of the nature of interpersonal relationships: "It emerges as an alternative to the politics that denies women positive gender identification, recognition, coming together in concert, and alliances."³ This is the case without there necessarily being ties of friendship, sympathy, or deference among us. Lagarde also maintains that it is a pact among women. It is necessary to make a pact among ourselves to fight against the misogyny instilled in us culturally and that destroys us. It is an invi-

tation to think outside patriarchal, androcentric logic. “Our pact is to recover the world for women and recover our bodies and our lives for each one of us.”⁴

Thus, the concept was introduced into feminist theory and practices in response to a need to create our own space, to create our own narratives about the movement and the relationships we establish among ourselves. We do not seek universal friendship among women or a code of unconditional support for each other. The idea is to reformulate the relationships that nourish and foster our great feminist movement.⁵ Defining our relationships and forms of behavior autonomously allows us, first of all, to emancipate ourselves from the patriarchal principle that dictates some kind of “natural” competition among us. Secondly, it guarantees that the discrepancies and criticisms among us are objective and based on what we do, think, and say, and not on assimilated misogynistic forms of behavior. And third, both inside and outside the movement, it promotes recognition, empathy, and actions *vis-à-vis* the structural inequalities that limit us as a social group.

Today, the concept of sisterhood is polemical among Mexican feminists, and some have even proposed it no longer be used. In the following part of this article, we propose to explain and resolve some of the most polemical points about using this idea in feminism and to develop our proposal about the notion of sisterhood.

One of the most frequent criticisms arises with the interpretation that sisterhood proposes that all women should be friends just because they are women. This criticism is not limited to mere friendship, but also states that the idea is a supposed imperative to “always take the woman’s side” or support all of them in all situations. This criticism is not always the result of misinterpreting the idea, but also because in many situations the limits of sisterly practices have been ambiguous. How do we know if we are acting out of sisterhood or due to mere unjustified or involuntary condescension regarding a woman in a random situation?

It is difficult to answer this question and we won’t try. We do propose, however, to conceive of sisterhood as a point of reference for our actions and not as an imperative or universal rule. We invite everyone to recognize that sisterhood is not affection for other women, but understanding that actions, positions, and situations based on (patriarchal) structural causes oppress and limit them.

Thus, if we base our actions and attitudes on a prior reflection of this kind, we will know that we are acting in sisterhood toward other women, regardless of whether in the end we decide to take the other women’s side or not.

Another common criticism of sisterhood is that it is selective; that is, the criterion for action is arbitrary. From that perspective, women are sisterly only toward those whom they love and only insofar as it is in their interest. Thus, those who raise this criticism complain that sisterhood is exercised as a technique of convenience and not an empathetic, understanding attitude with regard to women’s structural conditions. Even though we think this is an erroneous interpretation of the idea, it is common to see this selectiveness in sisterliness in relationships, for example between feminist women and other women—feminist or not—who occupy positions of power in public institutions particularly. From the standpoint of feminist criticism, those women are often called “guardians of patriarchy,” since they defend institutions that, from the very moment they were created, are patriarchal and do not concern themselves or occupy themselves in eradicating the violence and inequality women are faced with.

This issue is delicate, without a doubt. It should be clearly stated, on the one hand, that the practical drawbacks in the existing exercise of sisterhood are not reason enough to justify the disappearance of the concept and the notion of sisterhood in theoretical, philosophical, and activist feminism. One thing is refining the concept and ensuring that it be better assimilated, and another very different thing is for the movement to treat it as useless and undesirable.

Here, we propose and foster the notion of sisterhood as the understanding and empathy about the structural causes that oppress and sideline women to certain experiences, positions, and realities. In this sense, our proposal aims for an indiscriminate exercise of sisterhood and the understanding of different conditions (class, ethnicity, geographic, etc.) that create more limits or privileges

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for different women. We appeal to questioning the structures and institutions that perpetuate the patriarchal system without losing empathy for the bodies with historicity of women who may occupy those structures. This way it will be easier to understand that a woman who decides and may carry out her professional life inside state institutions is not a traitor to feminist causes.

For many years, our struggle has been precisely for us women to be able to develop personally and professionally as we want to. We already face many pitfalls, created by patriarchy and institutionalized misogyny. It is the safe place we have given ourselves among women in feminism that has allowed us to advance to where we are today. We propose, then, a kind of sisterhood that allows us to continue to be that safe place for all women who decide to live their lives as they please and also for those who have not yet achieved that. This notion of sisterhood bets on an intersectional feminist perspective: it forces us to look to the structural limitations we experience as women that make us different.

Within our proposal is plenty of room for criticism, disagreements, and confrontation among women—which we foster. We are interested in a discussion that is not guided by misogynist behavior and prejudices that we


often interiorize. In the same way, we are interested in racist, classist, and, in general, discriminatory discourses not being camouflaged under the banner of feminism. We seek equal conditions for all women in our society and the world, and we are committed to treating them all equally. For that reason, we propose a notion of sisterhood that understands the historicity shot through with patriarchy and other orders that limit women's bodies. Regardless of political, ideological, class, ethnic, and professional differences, we relate to bodies shot through by historicities and constructed from the subjectivities of the meanings of being women.


For us, then, sisterhood transcends structures, institutions, intersections, and differences at the level of the *doxa*. It is empathy toward a body that, like mine, has a historicity shot through by patriarchy. We aspire to women inside feminism knowing that we are different, that we are adverse to each other, and, above all, that we are accompanied and understood. **MM**

▼ Notes


- 1 Librería de Mujeres de Milán, *No creas tener derechos. La generación de la libertad femenina en las ideas y vivencias de un grupo de mujeres*, María Cinta Montagut, trans. (Madrid: Horas y horas, 1991), p. 56.
- 2 bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 37.
- 3 Marcela Lagarde, "Pacto entre mujeres. Sororidad," *Aportes para el debate*, 2006, <https://studylib.es/doc/6973781/pacto-entre-mujeres-sororidad-->, p. 125.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 5 By feminist movement, we understand the great, dynamic, fluid wave of women that presents an alternative political, philosophical, theoretical, emotional, and social proposal to the heteropatriarchal order.


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