ORIGINAL RESEARCH
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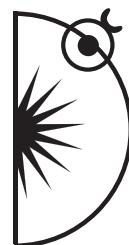
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Sisterhood in Academia. Understanding and Experiencing Women's Collaboration in the Social Sciences

Abstract

This article presents selected findings from research on sisterhood in academia, exploring how it is understood and experienced by women working in research and teaching posi-

tions in the social sciences. The article addresses two research questions: How do women working in Polish universities define sisterhood? What are the experiences of the interviewees in this regard? The overarching research method was exploratory interviewing, which we conducted using individual in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured scenario with open-ended questions. We interviewed twenty women working in various academic positions at Polish universities.

In the text, we present the findings of the exploratory research on the understanding of sisterhood, as well as the narrators' experiences within the context of cooperation between women, solidarity, and sisterhood-based relationships.

Introduction: the rationale and design of the research project

For researchers using feminist perspectives, sisterhood is a key concept of second-wave feminism. The originators of the term intended its introduction to give women a sense of community across divisions, unity, and a sense of the women's movement in the face of oppression and domination. The crux of sisterhood, thus understood, was horizontal, non-hierarchical relationships between women (see, for example, Morgan, 1970; Hannam, 2010). Cultural, journalistic, and, increasingly, popular scientific accounts of the Polish context to which we refer also reveal a certain positive reception of the notion, framing social phenomena of bonding and ideological support for socially valuable activities within its framework.

In this report, we present an excerpt from our ongoing analyses and the initial conclusions of a research project that our seven-person group has been conducting regularly since March 8, 2023. We are investigating how women academics understand and perceive sisterhood, and to what extent they experience sisterhood at work in Polish universities. The project emerged from regular meetings, initially focused on sharing experiences and identifying a common area of research interest. As the project developed, we formed a group of academics and women working in various areas of education, all with research experience, in which we regularly analysed sisterhood both as a theoretical category and a social phenomenon potentially present in aca-

demia. At a certain point, we began to call ourselves the Women's Thinking Collective, bringing together people from diverse backgrounds who jointly undertake empirical research and share insights through analytical and supportive supervision seminars.

Our idea from the outset was not only to develop a shared understanding of sisterhood among female researchers but also to apply these ideas to our research and analytical work. Therefore, within the concept of academic parity, we decided to use bibliographic references only to works by authors who identify as women, which we largely achieved, with two exceptions.

Sisterhood – in search of meaning(s)?

The category of sisterhood we invoke and explore is not derived directly from feminist theory or foundational knowledge but from the empirical data we collected and discussed together during the Collective's meetings. The category has evolved and changed in response to our discussions. The thought of what sisterhood is also developed after our meetings, and we came to each subsequent meeting with thoughtful categories and read more texts. Operationalising the category of sisterhood was one of the first key tasks we set ourselves. We searched for it in theoretical treatises, monographs, and research reports, as well as in popular culture products and colloquial understandings of the concept, drawing on personal experiences.

From one meeting to the next, our concept changed and evolved. The category of sisterhood that we invoke and explore emerged from the work of the Collective. It is composed of the theories of our intellectual foremothers (de Beauvoir, Cixous, Haraway, hooks), our situatedness, the encounters and conversations we had in the Collective, and, finally, the experiences our interviewees shared with us. Consequently, we adopted an understanding of sisterhood as a bond between women based on a specific commonality of experience (Mrozik, 2014), the foundation of which is empathic listening. This approach enables us to learn as fully as possible about the world of the female interviewees, their experiences, and their emotions (Kopyś, 2018, p. 8). Such a broad understanding of the main research category determines which way we want to look while not closing us off to what we can see.

In subsequent stages of the research, we jointly considered how applying the idea of sisterhood might reduce hierarchical relationships between women and whether this is possible within academia, where relationships are, by their nature and in relation to structure, both horizontal and hierarchical. In a workplace structured like a university, is it possible to foster "a relationship of closeness and a sense of connectedness between women who are not related to each other, referring back to a commonality of experience derived from being a woman"? (Mrozik, 2014, pp. 511–513).

Although we limited the pre-conceptualisation, we have drawn inspiration from existing knowledge and philosophy. Following feminist phenomenologists, we made the basic assumption about the gendered experience of working in academia: "gender is a fundamental component of social existence and subjective experience (lived experience)" (Fisher, 2017, p. 586). We also acknowledge, following Bonnie Mann, that our inquiry is "research conducted from a woman's particular point of view" (cf. Mann, 2020; Adamiak, 2023, pp. 26–27). According to feminist standpoint theory, cognition is closely linked to the position of the cognitive subject in society: "[I]t is a position that derives in part from our exclusion from the production of cultural and intellectual discourse and strategies for appealing to our experience as the basis of new knowledge, new culture" (Smith, 1987, p. 107). Contemporary research provides insights into academia in Central and Eastern European countries as an organisation where gender stereotypes and gender exclusion are reproduced, as evidenced by numerous examples of challenges and barriers encountered by women (see Górska, 2023).

Third-wave feminists criticise sisterhood as an overly simplistic and sentimental concept since, contrary to earlier assumptions, women are not united by a single common interest based solely on their shared gender (see hooks, 2013; Lorde, 2015). The concept of intersectionality, popularised in academic discourse in the 1980s (see Crenshaw, 1989), highlights the importance of factors beyond gender in differentiating women's social statuses, including ethnicity and race, place of residence, disability, and non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity.

In our view, this does not invalidate the potential of sisterhood as a helpful category for describing the social world; rather, it implies the need to

look at localised, situated readings and interpretations of it. Research on the understanding of the notion of sisterhood in Poland has been conducted by, among others, Sikorska (2019, p. 59), who shows that in media discourses, it is understood both as a struggle, a form of resistance, but also as a demand to "build communities of support based on empathy, solidarity, trust and concrete, tangible help." Meanwhile, Brzozowska-Brywczyńska and Nymś-Górna noted that, although sisterhood is a poorly established or entrenched category among women participants in black protests, at least four groups of meanings can be distinguished: shared experience, female solidarity, alliances and bonds across divisions, and the practice of caring (2022, pp. 42–51).

Taking into account the research above, feminist critiques, as well as the conclusions of our joint research within the context of Polish contemporary culture and academia, we consider sisterhood to be a gendered category that defies strictly feminist theories. This is especially true given that feminism, both as a philosophy and as a social movement, has a long, multi-wave history that cannot be reduced to a systematic, coherent system of claims or practices: "[…] the diversity of views developed within feminist theory does not allow a reliable thinker to make generalisations […]" (Derra, 2010, p. 2). From this perspective, the category of sisterhood refers to the phenomenologically understood lived experience of femininity (Adamiak, 2023), emphasising respect for each other's differences rather than accentuating similarities between women. It also has an action and activist dimension. In disseminating the concept of sisterhood, we see hope for the possibility of building supportive, motivating, and developmental relationships among those with experience of femininity in higher education.

The research procedure, specific problems, and methodological assumptions

The research employs an exploratory research method, also known as reconnaissance research, which aims to clarify the research concept (Minsky, 2017).

The aim of our study is to identify and describe the phenomenon of sisterhood as experienced by women working at Polish universities. During the Collective meetings, we developed research problems that were reflected in an interview scenario used to interview women academics at Polish univer-

sities, as well as one woman who, while not employed by a university, collaborates academically with one. In this report, we aim to clarify two specific problems, which serve as a good starting point for exploring the issue:

1. How is sisterhood defined by women working at Polish universities in the social sciences?
2. What are the experiences of women working at Polish universities regarding sisterhood-based relationships in academia?

We partially operationalised "defining sisterhood" and "experience of sisterhood-based relationships by female academics" in the interview protocol. This involved imposing specific initial categories on the participants derived from previous discussions about our experiences and texts of different provenance that we had read. To understand their definitions of sisterhood, we asked participants about the contexts in which they encountered the concept, their associations with it, how they understand it, and what their attitudes are towards it. In order to find out about their experiences, we enquired about collaborating with women in an academic setting (characteristics, methods, differences in collaboration between men and women, and conditioning factors), women's solidarity and rivalry (well-being around other female academics, experienced support or lack of it, circumstances), and sisterly relationships (whether and how they are experienced, in what forms and circumstances, who participates in them, if they do not occur, what is experienced instead). We used these categories to structure the analysis of the empirical data presented below.

We divided ourselves into pairs, with each pair assigned specific research problems to code within the interview transcriptions or the problem-focused mini-reports written from them. We then extracted key conclusions, which are presented below in the Analysis section. The textual analysis of the research material, consisting of interview transcriptions, was done by coding around specific categories: meaning and experience.

Twenty female social scientists took part in the study, including fourteen PhD students employed as assistant professors, a master's student employed as an assistant, a PhD student employed as an assistant, a PhD student not employed at the university at the time of the interview, three professors (one

full professor and two university professors)[1]. All were associated with Polish universities and identified as women. We conducted individual in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured scenario, using open-ended questions to explore the research problems. Some interviews took the form of narrative interviews, allowing the participants to freely describe their life worlds and stories and interpret the meanings of the phenomena they described (see Maison, 2022). The participants were informed of the study's purpose, gave their consent, and were assured anonymity. There was no conflict between supervisors and subordinates during the study.

After each interview, we prepared a mini-report or transcription, noting key points to clarify research questions. We also collected metrics such as length of service in the profession, the social science represented, degree, title, or function held at the university. These studies were collectively discussed and analysed during meetings, answering the research questions posed earlier. In presenting the research results, we used pseudonyms for the interviewees and indicated their academic status.

Analysis of the collected research material

The notion of sisterhood: familiarity and perceptions among female narrators

What emerges from the statements of our interviewees is an understanding of sisterhood as a personal, interpersonal, and emotional relationship that has relatively little to do with the professional context. This is in line with Majchrzak and Frydrysiak (2021, p. 15), who wrote: "The idea of sisterhood is practised to a small extent in work and study environments." When defining sisterhood, the participants discuss its diverse meanings: for some, it denotes a blood relationship, while for others, it represents a relationship of choice, although most do not believe in or feel a need for such a relationship.

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[1] It is important to distinguish between the types of professor in Polish academic system. Titular professor/ full professor refers to someone who has been awarded the formal academic title of "professor" by the President of Poland. University professor refers to someone who has achieved the next level of academic advancement after the doctorate (called habilitation) and has the right to promote and supervise doctoral theses.

When they present sisterhood relationships as kinship relationships, our interviewees echoed the sentiments of Agnieszka (PhD): "*It is tough for me to understand it because I do not have siblings. It is a somewhat abstract concept for me. But I understand it mostly as emotional support.*" The participants associate it with blood ties but "*completely not with the world of academia*" (Bianka, PhD). The concept of sisterhood as an alliance only between women did not resonate strongly; some interviewees even extended it to include relationships with brothers and, more broadly, with men: "*How about extending this notion to the concept of siblinghood? Broader than sisterhood or brotherhood. I don't know if this is possible at university*" (Zofia, professor); "*It's an opportunity for support and help in various situations, including non-work situations, including family situations. Not only between women, but also with men (sister–brother)*" (Zofia, professor).

The narrators mention only one strictly feminist context for the use of the term sisterhood – as a relationship in social and political movements for women, where it becomes a unifying driver of action. In relation directly to academia, however, statements about the absence of such relationships prevail, even denying the possibility of sisterhood: "*Let's not create a fiction either, let's not contribute to that, so you know... I like this kind of togetherness, where if I have some input, you have some input. You can make something cool out of it together*" (Maria, PhD). Few statements mention that, at university, "*gender is not an obstacle to achieving goals*" (Iga, PhD). Ensuring success in academic, teaching, and organisational work at a university takes place in heteronomous/coeducational relationships.

For the few participants who did express views on sisterhood in academia, they characterised it as a relationship built on support, assistance, mutual respect, and trust. They identify it with the possibility of talking frankly about virtually any topic, where they can count on understanding, though not necessarily acceptance, of all behaviours. For these participants, sisterhood is characterised by non-judgement and honesty: "*When you look at her, you feel like she's not going to screw you over, she will not pull any punches*" (Maria, PhD).

On an emotional level, this academic sisterhood is about support, trust, feelings of closeness, understanding, warmth, and security: "*We are connected by more than just the workplace or the immediate environment*" (Helena,

PhD). When asked about how sisterhood manifests, Maria (PhD) talks about the lack of pretence, a kind of authenticity in the relationship: "*In ordinariness. Ordinariness. Not pretending. Well, yes. Exactly when someone is an ordinary person, they are such a beautiful person, you know, so uncoloured in any way. Moreover, it seems to me that if I were to say whether I know someone like that, then yes.*" However, she immediately added a caveat: "*I know many women who are also interested in being your sister as long as you have those things to offer that interest her.*"

Interestingly, sisterhood is defined by our interviewees both positively and negatively, from associations with solidarity and warmth that facilitate daily life in academia and mobilise challenges to being regarded as something artificial, done by force. One interviewee pointed out that sisterhood can be a safe relationship for women, as it does not have sexual overtones, as might be the case in a man–woman relationship. Kamila (PhD), on the other hand, stated explicitly that she associates sisterhood negatively: "[…] *I cannot explain why I see it in terms of negativity. In the category of proving, I don't know, the need to prove women's strength. For me, it lies very close to... Very close to...* [thinks] *Very close to feminists; oh, maybe that's it. But extreme feminists, you know? Radical ones, very strict ones, ones with a sharpened dimension that I would not like to have too much in common with.*"

When we inquired about the manifestations of the lack of sisterhood among women, the participants defined these relationships in negative terms: "*These are women who don't congratulate me*" (Iga, PhD), or "*I don't feel the chemistry*" (Iga, PhD).

Narrators' experiences

Content analysis of the interviews reveals that women of science seek relationships with other women, strive for them, which is reflected in the words of Antonina (professor): "*Well, I kind of tried to surround myself from the beginning, to look for female allies.*" At the same time, they are often confronted with disappointment resulting from their inability to maintain these relationships. Such disappointments can lead to a reluctance to form collaborations exclusively with women. Consequently, many of the interviewees had no desire to unite with women.

The structured nature of working in academia means support is more likely to come from individuals higher in position or with greater seniority than from peers of similar status. This kind of support was mentioned by most of the interviewees. "*There are islands of cool women, and they stick together*" (Iga, PhD) – acts of solidarity take place somewhere on the fringes of academia or in small units (departments, chairs, research groups) that are structured in such a way that they share common values.

According to the interviewees, there is no room for sisterhood in academia because a community is formed around a scientific issue, a research topic, or a common project. Academia is thus perceived as a substantive community rather than an emotional one, following the traditional model of a community of knowledge rather than the current of emotional history of knowledge described by contemporary female authors, which emphasises the importance of individuals' experiences and the relationships they build with each other (see Sobolewska, 2022; Waquet, 2024). Our interviewees estimate that women in academia choose to collaborate not because of their gender but because of their colleagues' personalities, based on their competencies, knowledge, and experience. Hard work and perseverance are seen as key to success in academia, while helping others, including them in specific tasks, rewarding their actions, and motivating them, are considered secondary.

The primary reason that people working in academia compete is to secure prestige rather than the financial rewards. The rivalry between university employees was described interestingly by Maria, a PhD student with thirteen years of experience working at a university: "*It all depends on what is at stake. If there is nothing to gain, the atmosphere is calm. As always, like everywhere. The environment surprised me at the election a long time ago, right after [name] and the team started running for deans. Well, all you can do is sit and watch, you know? It surprised me a lot because I thought that people with a university education today should be able to set social standards, yet they behave exactly like in pseudo reality TV programmes.*"

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the eagerness to compete in academia – among women and, in fact, among all employees of a particular unit – depends on the personal benefits to be gained, whether financial or related to career advancement. When there is something personal to be gained,

values such as honesty, respect, and cooperation (all of which are essential components of sisterhood) are absent.

A common experience of women working in science at university is that they are often given administrative tasks to perform[2]. The number of responsibilities imposed on and carried out by women can make them feel frustrated and overwhelmed. Our analysis reveals there is a female environment in which issues of feminism and sisterhood are treated instrumentally, with gender being used as a ticket to career advancement. This attitude can be illustrated by the phrase: "I am a woman, and I deserve it." Relationships with other women are seen through the prism of status and position (possibly seniority and age) rather than the fact that the person is a woman. If sisterhood is understood as a horizontal relationship, then what separates woman at university is their status and position.

In summary, sisterhood arises when two domains, the private and the professional, intersect. In this context, the professional aspect encompasses a readiness to offer help, openness, and trust, which is traditionally the foundation of professional sisterhood. Among our narrators, some highlighted their privileged position as women: "*I feel great as a woman at the university; I act with women who want to have an impact on reality*" (Iga, PhD).

In terms of acting together with women, our interviewees indicated that they understood solidarity – one of the key elements of experiencing sisterhood – as: "*super-justice, support in professional and personal development, cooperation and attention to the interests of the community, from the creation of women's communities to civic education supporting their subjective agency in society*" (Justyna, PhD).

The analysis of the narratives reveals that the understanding of justice exists on a continuum. On one end is solidarity, which is an intrinsic value that focuses on the development of women in academia (both within the immediate working environment and the broader, imagined community). On the other end is utilitarian solidarity, which is a tool to achieve other goals and form strategic alliances.

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[2] The same problem was identified and described by Agata Włodkowska-Bagan and Małgorzata Winiarczyk-Kossakowska in the report "Women in Polish Politics. From Diagnosis to Cooperation," Warsaw 2018.

Considering different work areas, the female academics distinguish solidarity in professional and academic matters from solidarity in situations concerning their everyday life. The former manifests in establishing alliances for the advancement of research and science, and support for women in academia and in professional roles. The latter involves understanding and empathising with the unique experiences of women, which includes offering support in fulfilling non-academic roles (such as wife and mother) that may or may not be work-related. Diverse images of female solidarity emerge from the respondents' statements, which can be plotted on a bipolar axis depending on their underlying motivations.

Thus, on the one hand, women's solidarity can be more intentional and positive, aimed at improving their situation. This form can be termed "solidarity for." This dimension of women's solidarity serves a common cause not rooted in a concretised form of oppression. Solidarity is established through the dissemination of professionally useful information (the informal group "Darcie Pierza"[3] – one of the social media groups Feather Tearing Group) or the grassroots creation of communities addressing the situation of women at universities by stimulating reflection and action ("Muzeum Historii Kobiet" – Women's History Museum Foundation).

On the other hand, solidarity can take on a reactive dimension, mainly in response to situations of threat, such as violence, bullying, or the restriction of freedom of action. This form can be called "solidarity against." There is no programmatic intention to change reality; instead, it is a response to external factors that trigger some form of restriction or oppression. The triggering

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[3] The anthropological prototype for the practice of sisterhood can be found in the old Polish village tradition of "darcie pierza" (feather tearing). During these gatherings, the women of the village would gather to pluck the feathers from geese and ducks and then tear the feathers from the down. Men were strictly forbidden from performing this task – relegated to the role of "spoilsports," teasing the women and scattering the feathers. When this happened, the women would throw the men out of the house, allowing them back only for dinner. This feather tearing tradition involved women visiting each other's homes, where they would pluck and separate the feathers, and then prepare a dinner that ended with dancing and singing. While these events were social gatherings, providing women with a rare opportunity to meet, talk, and share stories, they had a practical purpose: without the feathers, there would be no warm quilts for the winter (Pelcowa, 2021; Szymańska, 2020; Kuciel-Frydryszak, 2023)

factor need not be permanent (the existence of categories of men as such), although it may be. More often, however, it takes a concretised temporary form (e.g. tightening anti-abortion laws, bullying female co-workers, negative employee evaluations).

Some of our interviewees noted that the nature of academic work is not conducive to forming sincere bonds and alliances. They say it is lonely, individualised work, lacking collectivity, common interests and goals, with limited spaces for cooperation. Therefore, some indicated that there is no need, space, or conditions for solidarity with other women in their work. A significant number of the interviewees view academia as a workplace that fosters rivalry, cronyism, and the pursuit of personal interests. In this view, every act of female solidarity can be seen as a form of resistance[4]. Adopting such a perspective would make it possible to analyse the power of female solidarity manifestations to violate and challenge the status quo – the systemic, normative, and axiological conditions of work in academia.

Women's solidarity was often seen by the interviewees as unnecessary, as Hanna (PhD) stated: "*Women's solidarity? I don't know. I don't have that need to feel solidarity myself. I've never had that need to feel that we are women. It is alien to me. It is rather nice when there are nice people around. And whether they are female or male is secondary. […] [I]n general, when it comes to the unity of the sexes – that we are women, that we should support each other and share higher ideas – I don't feel that.*" It was also seen as occasional, as Hanna further explained, "*I don't feel that need, but maybe because I feel like a strong woman, well maybe I do not feel the need to prove that strength yet and unite in that strength, right?*"

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[4] In this context, the categories of resistance created by Prof. Marek Krajewski are particularly relevant. He distinguishes them based on two variables: spectacularity and the effort put into practising them. Krajewski identifies four forms of resistance: discrete resistance, spectacular resistance, opportunistic resistance, and weak resistance. These categories could be an excellent starting point for a deeper analysis of the significance of women's solidarity to academia. Krajewski, M., Opory [Form of Resistance] (2018), in: J. Sawicka & M. Wróblewska (Eds.), *Krzyczałem, a kiedy krzyczałem, pękały rzeczy cenne…* [I screamed, and when I screamed, valuable articles burts into bits…]. Gdańsk City Gallery.

Meanwhile, Iga (PhD) spoke of "islands of women" who stick together, mainly due to a commonality of experience, such as motherhood, similar career stage, age, forming a common study circle, or sharing similar values such as decency, respect, problem-solving orientation, listening to each other, and meritocracy. It could be argued that forms of solidarity based on the commonality of experience are "safe" in that their primary purpose is to provide and receive support at a given time rather than to fight together or unite for change. In contrast, solidarity based on shared values seems to have greater potential to drive change. As Iga (PhD) described it, this involves "*not so much favouring women [or] defining quotas, but making the principle of overriding competence rather than sympathy, loyalty, or dependency relationships commonplace.*"

Conclusions and Recommendations

In our opinion, the anthropological prototype for the practice of sisterhood could be found in the old Polish village tradition of "darcie pierza" (feather tearing). Here, we find some allegories for women's collaborative work at the university: feather plucking could represent the collaborative writing of an article, conducting research, consulting on research ideas, discussing team dynamics, or exchanging literature. One interviewee described this as a contemporary, metaphorical framing of this practice. This is precisely what the female academics affiliated with one research centre called the social networking group they had created, which they used to support each other in their scientific activities.

The experience of sisterhood in academia, as revealed in the interviews, transcends the boundaries we initially set for the concept. The experience in the narrators' statements is not solely based on the commonality of women's experiences and empathetic listening; however, it is still possible to experience it through professional collaboration and solidarity among women who work in academia. Experiencing sisterhood involves receiving support from other women and may involve relationships with superiors (such as managers or promoters) or women of similar seniority.

Despite the numerous examples of experiencing sisterhood in academia that emerged from the women participating in the study, our interviewees were more likely to experience disappointment in their professional collaborations with women than with men. They attributed this to the fact that we

are socialised to build close relationships in a binary gender framework. We have higher expectations of relationships with women, which, in turn, results in more disappointment. However, negative examples do not dominate the narratives of sisterhood. Although blatant examples of overt rivalry and taking action against each other often relate to specific individuals and situations, an important aspect of these women's experiences is the observation that possessing information is a form of power. It can even be a subtle form of violence, manifested through the deliberate withholding of information from others as a strategy to gain a symbolic advantage.

Some female narrators did not see the need to experience sisterhood in academia. They described positive, safe frameworks for doing science alone: the daily presence of kindness that energises research and academic work, as well as decency, generosity, sharing what feels safe, and selflessness. What emerges from the statements is a picture of sisterhood that goes beyond academia. Academia is described as a hierarchical place characterised by domination, competition, the instrumental use of gender, and a lack of support for young mothers.

We propose that future analyses of sisterhood should be based on the assumption that sisterhood extends beyond strictly feminist theories and is, instead, a gendered category. What emerges from the narratives we collected is a picture of academia as a place that is far from equal. In our ongoing analysis, we will explore themes related to the presence of sisterhood in academic discourse, as well as the reasons for the need for collectivisation, examples of women's associations in universities, and manifestations of sisterhood in academic life.

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