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GIRL FRIENDS

by

CAMILA SANTANDER

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New

York

2022

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SANTANDER

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Camila Santander

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

Jean Halley

Thesis Advisor

Date

Elizabeth Macaulay

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT

Girl Friends

by

Camila Santander

Advisor: Jean Halley

Friendships between women are common and essential parts of women's lives; however, they are often overlooked. This capstone project titled *Girl Friends* is a film on which eight women are interviewed and asked about their friendships with other women. They discuss the importance of having female friends and how they create love, support, and companionship. The interviewees also talk about female friendships and romantic partners coexisting, the pressures to find a romantic partner to find fulfillment, as opposed to good friends. Additionally, they describe how friendships between women can be competitive and catty, and how female relationships can change as they grow up. The interviewees go over female relationships in TV Shows and Movies and give their opinions on whether they believe if these relationships are accurate or not. Finally, the interviewees talk about how they believe friendships between women can be feminist. This capstone project highlights the positive impact that female friendships have had in the interviewees' lives and encourages women to regard their girlfriends as significant parts of their lives. The film has been provided to the library and can be watched via CUNY Academic Works, additionally, *Girl Friends* is also available to view online at: <https://youtu.be/4NhRUx6bW-s>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for every single person who has contributed to my capstone and has supported me during my masters. Thank you to my advisor Jean Halley, who believed in my project and was there for me in every step of it. All your support was extremely valuable, and it was an honor to work with you. Thank you to my family, partner, and friends; you were all so patient and supportive. I am also grateful for the Graduate Center, all the wonderful professors, inspiring classmates, and staff members. Thank you to my best friend, who served as the main inspiration for pursuing the subject of female friendships. Finally, I am grateful for the eight women I interviewed to create this film, *Girl Friends*.

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DISCUSSION OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

Ever since I started my master's in the MALS program with a concentration in Women Gender and Sexuality studies, I have thought about what I would like my Thesis or Capstone project to be. I thought of many different projects, but none spoke to me. In my third semester, while we were still remote in school, but daily activities in NYC were a little more "normal," I started reflecting on my time doing my masters which had been done mostly online (my first semester was cut right in the middle due to the COVID-19 pandemic), and one thing I realized that had been so important during COVID was the connections we had to those close to us. Looking at my personal relations, I thought about the people closest to me, and while I do have a partner and a family that I can rely on for support, my best friend Sara is a crucial part of my support system. We have become so accustomed to each other's company, support, and love, that we have become as close as we each are to our romantic partners and members of our families.

To understand how close we truly are, I will provide a little background. We have been officially best friends, with the label "best," since 2009. We both went to the same school in Bolivia, until 2013 when I moved to Panama. When we said goodbye, we promised each other that we would not lose contact. We started texting through WhatsApp on the first day I was in Panama and calling each other whenever we had the chance. And we have not stopped since. It has been over eight years since we lived in the same country, and there has not been a day that we have not communicated with each other. Contemplating my relationship with Sara and talking about the female friendships of other women in my life has inspired me to explore the different dynamics of friendship between women and how they can be crucial to women's lives. Therefore, last semester (Spring 2021), in my Contemporary Feminist Theories class for my final paper, I wrote an autoethnography about friendship and focused on my friendship with Sara. This paper inspired me

to keep exploring the institution of friendship in my capstone.

For my capstone project, I decided to create a short video in which different women talk about their experiences with female friendships. I decided to produce a video because I would like my capstone to be public-facing, easily digestible, and understandable by a wider audience. I want this video to be part of my creative portfolio as a video producer and editor, as my long-term career goal is to become a documentary filmmaker. There are two creative choices I made for this video. First, I do not include myself or my friend Sara in the interviews for the video because I want to portray the perspectives of other women on this subject. The second creative choice is to not include any B-roll because I want the focus only on the women's responses. In film B-roll is footage that is extra to the primary video. Adding extra material could distract viewers from what the interviewees say.

This project aims to open up conversations about the importance of friendship for all individuals, focusing only on women.¹ Throughout my own experiences and studies, I have seen that friendships between women can be very powerful and very important parts of their lives and development—both as individuals and groups. In contrast to the reality of that importance, friendships among women are often portrayed as secondary, of lesser importance, or even negative. That has certainly been my experience and in the interviews I find it to be common. I believe that challenging that narrative can motivate women to seek support and companionship from their female friends.

¹ Whereas the topic of relationships between gender expansive folks is understudied topic, I am focusing only on women (all those who identify as women) due to the limits of time. Any individual who identifies as woman, is a woman. I hope that I inspire other researchers to take up this research and explore the friendship experiences of more diverse genders.

I have not found much scholarly literature addressing female friendships in feminism or women studies throughout my research and time doing this project. Therefore, with my capstone, I hope to encourage scholars to explore this topic. Yet ultimately, I am creating a video for a broader audience, one that goes beyond academia. I hope that my video will help people to see female friendships as essential parts of women's lives. I hope to inspire different women who watch the video to consider their female friendships and give them the time and appreciation they deserve.

This capstone project focused on eight women between the ages of 21 and 35, all living in New York or close to the city. I am pleased with the diversity of my interviewees, they represented different races, gender expressions², and sexual orientations; although the latter was not evident on the videos themselves, I believe that I captured a good variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, there are many more areas of female friendship that could be explored from a positive and feminist perspective. Particularly I would be interested in looking at female friendships inside feminist and women's organizations, as well as female friendships within different age groups, long-term female friends, and friendships between women of different races and nationalities³.

Through the classes in my masters, none of the materials were explicitly related to friendships, but I did see friendships between women "trapped" behind all the theories, history, and

²As mentioned above, all the interviewees identified as women. A couple of them used they/them pronouns or expressed their gender as non-binary.

³Looking back at the project, it would have been constructive to ask about the nature of the interviewee's friendships regarding race or nationality. Although a few of them do express the importance of having friendships within the same race and with other races, I think that for future investigations, looking at interracial or friendships between people of different nationalities, specifically, would be interesting.

literature. This is something that I want to point out because I believe that friendships can be such a common thing for the human experience that they often go overlooked. Still, more areas of study could be expanded by focusing more attention on them. The first class regarding my concentration I took in the MALS program was Introduction to Gender and Sexuality Studies. While a big part of this class focused on Gender and Queer studies, we took a look into the history of feminism and made critical points about feminist waves at the beginning of the semester. In the essay “Feminist Frequencies: Regenerating the Wave Metaphor,” Nancy A. Hewitt wrote about how the different waves of feminism came to be, their history, but most importantly, how these waves can be complicated when looked through an intersectional lens and various movements of women that were not American, heterosexual, middle class, and white. This text discusses women in different groups, including collectives, waves, movements, or activists. When I look into these groups and zoom in on the individuals who comprised them, I see women who were friends, with common goals in mind, that decided to come together and demand their rights. In my other classes in the MALS program, I took a closer look at how some female friendships helped women and advanced feminist movements.

In my Global Feminism class, we looked at different feminist movements and focused some of the studies on solidarity. For this class, I read “A Black Feminist Statement” by the Combahee River Collective. This text talks about the group, why it was created, its involvement, and how it has helped advance the movement of Black feminism. This text discusses the challenges Black feminists and Black women encounter, the connections of racism and sexism that come with being a Black woman in American society. In my interviews I learn that women find friendships with other women deeply important and beneficial. Like the Combahee River Collective, my interviewees relate to each other and understand their struggles because they have also lived similar experiences. As the Combahee River Collective writes, “In the process of consciousness-raising,

actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression” (The Combahee River Collective 273). What calls my attention here is “actually life-sharing,” because while doing activism for their cause, they were also sharing life experiences and relating to each other not only as activists but also as friends. It was this “life-sharing” that friends do, that made them realize how much their experiences as Black women had in common. While this might be simplifying the meaning of this text and the movement itself, I believe that one reason women joined the collective, one reason that they saw such meaning in its work and its existence, is that they were able to trust each other, to talk to each other about the struggles they faced, and especially to be friends with each other. “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community, which allows us to continue our struggle and work” (273). And while they do not specifically use the word “friend” in their text, sisters and community could have the same meaning in this context.

As part of the syllabus of this same class, I came across the text “Unpacking Solidarities of the Oppressed: Notes on Trans Struggles in India” by Gee Imaan Semmalar. This text focuses on transgender men in India and how the author wishes to create a community similar to those of transgender women known as hijras; the author highlights the solidarity and collaboration between them. Semmalar’s descriptions of the communities of transgender women were remarkably similar to my own ideas of friends taking the place of one’s family. Transgender women in India join communities of other transgender women organized in “houses.” Many of these women have been victims of abuse and discrimination by society and their own families; therefore, these communities have been great to support each other. “Trans women in India live, work, and occupy public space together. This is a strategy for survival arrived upon out of a deep understanding of

public violence, discrimination, and vulnerability” (Semmlar 287). This description of transgender women in India tied to what one interviewee shared during her interview. She said that female friendships helped her break out of the patriarchal ideas she had of society which came from her own family. While growing up my interviewee constantly witnessed how her father was the “head of the household,” and how her mother had always placed herself and her opinions as less important.

I drew inspiration from Mondal, et al’s research on hijras — transgender women in India who were interviewed about the struggles they have faced in fitting into the world. I found Mondal’s methodology inspiring because he focuses on each hijra individually, which is also what I did on my own capstone interviewing women. The interviewees explained how important it was for them to be able to find a community where they fit in and felt a sense of belonging, including the rejection many of them faced from their own families and communities. “According to the hijra participants, their sense of belongingness with the hijra community helped them cope with feelings of deprivation and vulnerability. Also, it is in this group that they could openly discuss their emotions, pains, needs, etc., without the fear of being negatively evaluated or discriminated” (Mondal et al. 170–71). I think it is important to point out that although it is positive that hijras have found communities in which they could live and feel protected, they still face a lot of discrimination socially and are still considered outcasts of society, many of them working as beggars and prostitutes.

Similar to the hijras in India, a look into queer families in the U.S. has close connections to the importance of friendships. Kath Weston discusses this connection in her book *Families We Choose*. In her book Weston describes queer individuals in the U.S. that consider each other family and rely on each other due to the lack of support they receive from their own biological or original families and communities; she focuses most of her study in San Francisco, California. Weston

offers one section on friendships that convert into a community in the book. This section gives essential descriptions that can be related to how friendships between women can end up building organized groups and communities. Weston claims that gays and lesbians were finding each other and thus creating communities together, whether that was organized groups, geographical locations, e.g., gay neighborhoods or gay bars, or even tight friendships. Finding people with their own sexual orientation in common created that kinship, similarly to friendships for women with other women, can also be felt as a “chosen family.” They are the individuals with whom women can be themselves and talk about what being a woman entails in their society. It is important to recognize that it can be problematic connecting women and queer individuals without considering their intersectionalities with each other and with other identities such as race, social class, economic status, etc. Nevertheless, communities of queer people finding their homes and forming strong connections with other queer people are the closest examples I could find that resemble friendships between women.

A more concrete example of queer communities or “chosen families” can be seen in ballroom culture. They are characterized by communities of Black and Hispanic queer individuals who form houses and compete in balls. “The ballroom community is a complex and longstanding form of cultural practice within the African American GLBTQ community, in which young people deliberately form and maintain kin-ties, constructing both homes and families for themselves” (Arnold and Bailey 146). These new families formed can provide strong support systems, especially for young queer people who have been rejected by their own families or those who feel that their communities around them do not understand them. It is crucial for these individuals to find a community where they fit in; in many cases, their original families may ostracize them for being gay or queer; but in other predominantly white queer spaces, they may experience discrimination based on their race (Telander et al. 1392). Friendships between women can also help

them navigate how they experience the world according to their race and sex. Race was one aspect that was importantly connected to a few of my interviewees, especially to those who did not identify as white.

I have realized that by looking at my past classes that in a lot of cases, I will not be able to make direct connections to the words “friend,” “best friend,” or “friendship” in the literature studied. However, the links are there with different words that still show groups of people as friends referring to themselves as communities, collectives, sisters, groups, etc. I am fascinated by the line that divided more organized groups with friendships. And although in many cases, this can be a very sharp line that divides the relationships as strictly profession with those relationships that are of friends, I believe that in most cases, the line is blurred because finding good friendships helps some people find their community of people who provide them companionship and support. These organized groups do this same thing while being very active in creating change for those in their communities.

Female friendships were part of texts studied in women and feminist studies; although the institution of friendship itself is not necessarily regarded as feminist; it is influential in the construction of feminist literature. A book that represents this is *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, which I had to read for the class Feminist Texts and Contexts. This class focuses on feminism in the 1910s, and this book gives an excellent example of a female friendship that has been influential in a positive way. The protagonist of the novel Edna Pontellier has the kind of life society deems perfect: she was born with money and social standing, and she has kids and a husband who supports her. But from Edna’s perspective, her life is not perfect. She wants to be an independent artist without a husband, and at the time, this was unthinkable for women of Edna’s class. Edna was friends with Mademoiselle Reisz who served as an inspiration for Edna to follow her passions. Mademoiselle Reisz did not have kids, was not married, and was an artist, things that at the time

were not appreciated in women. Edna admired Reisz because Reisz ignored society and did what she wanted to do. Reisz inspired Edna to be more than a mother and wife and showed her that a different way of living existed. This example of female friendships from the 1910s demonstrates that female friendships have opened many women's eyes to new possibilities and opportunities for greater independence and autonomy.

Additionally, it has been in a couple of classes that I have encountered the fantastic literature of bell hooks. When I looked deeper into her writing, I have found *All About Love*, a book that has helped me develop this project and has also supported many of the ideas I present. This book talks about the nuclear family and how isolation is created within them; their structure is of the husband that is at the head of the family, then the wife, and finally the kids. Then hooks explores her own friendships and how in her experience, many of her close friends have put their friendships as secondary once they have found a romantic partner. hooks challenges this and argues for the importance of friendships as essential to one's life. "Most of us are raised to believe we will either find love in our first family (our family of origin) or, if not there, in the second family we are expected to form through committed romantic couplings, particularly those that lead to marriage and/or lifelong bondings. Many of us learn as children that friendship should never be seen as just as important as family ties. However, friendship is the place in which a great majority of us have our first glimpse of redemptive love and caring community" (hooks 134).

There is also research centered on women's friendship relationships with animals, Jean Halley's *Horse Crazy: Girls and the Lives of Horses* walks the reader through a better understanding of the friendships that girls and women form with horses. Halley describes how some women's relationship with horses can help them form identity through their love of these animals. In her book, Dr. Halley talked with some girls who described that their relationship with horses gave them a sense of freedom from the pressure of having a relationship with boys: "This

horse relationship provides a freedom from the demands of heteronormative love. Girls offer care to their horses and gain courage from their horse relationships, and they experience intimacy, love, and freedom with horses” (Halley 155). These relationships that women experience with horses could also be related to friendships that women have with other women; through these friendships, women escape the pressures of finding romantic relationships with men.

I explored the subject of female friendships in an autoethnography I wrote for my Contemporary Feminist Theories class with Dr. Jean Halley, who I am so grateful to have as my advisor for my capstone project. The main text of that class that inspired this capstone was Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich coined the term “lesbian continuum” to refer to all female-to-female relationships that do not necessarily have to include any type of sexual or romantic interest. Rich highlights the importance of these relationships and argues that their trivialization and invalidation “have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other” (Rich 657). Rich argues that women’s relationships with other women have been highly unvalued in our society, and relationships with men have been prioritized. Additionally, heterosexuality in society is not only assumed for every individual, especially women, but it also acts as a system of oppression. Contrary to the belief that female friendships are outgrown and move to a second frame once they find a male partner, I argue that female friendships and partners can co-exist, and they both have their own importance, and neither has to be more vital to women’s lives than the other.

Although Rich’s essay was initially published in the 1980s, many ideas are still relevant today. Heterosexuality continues to be the norm for women. There has been an “idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage” (Rich 640) seen in books, movies, TV shows, reality TV, and even social and political figures. I wonder now if there had been an idealization of genuine female

friendships, just as there are of romantic relationships, perhaps women would dedicate their time strengthening their friendship relationships instead of looking for romantic ones. If love relationships with men were not idealized, maybe more women would seek the strength, support, and companionships from their female friends instead. Rich argues that women have tended to gravitate towards their female friends and relations, and many of them have done it while resisting marriage; women choose each other (Rich 646). The 1960s' women's liberation movement (also known as the feminist second wave) started, in part, because some women trusted other women to come together and ask (sometimes through literature, art, other times through protests and revolts) for equal opportunities, justice, and fairness. Although feminism does not look the same from time to time and from place to place, feminism needs women to come together as friends, partners, companions, sisters, and allies.

Friendship among women has been the cement not only of the various historical waves of the feminist movement but as well of numerous communities of women throughout history who defied the local conventions for their gender and lived lives of creative disorder (Friedman 287).

Concurrent with Friedman's ideas, women change the communities that they were "given or found" to form new connections with other women. This does not necessarily mean that they abandon the communities they are already a part of and leave all their mother/wife responsibilities behind; instead, they form friendships and attachments with other women with whom they can express their deepest desires or annoyances.

In Rich's essay, there is also an exploration of "lesbian existence" from an anti-capitalist perspective. Compulsory heterosexuality deems women as inferior to men; it shows that we live in a heteropatriarchal society that enforces a traditional gender ideology. Using friendship between women to break out of those roles and gain autonomy as individuals — and also a collective, could

be helpful to challenge compulsory heterosexuality; strong female friendships can disrupt social reproduction and the nuclear family. Although not really studied in academia, the marriage of platonic female friends is an up-and-coming phenomenon that has been seen in popular media. *The New York Times* (May 1, 2021) recently explored women's friendships taking the explicit form of family. "From Best Friends to Platonic Spouses," describes the situation of two couples. The first one, Jay Guercio and Krystle Purificato, were two best friends who never had a romantic relationship but decided to be life partners; therefore, they decided to join each other in marriage. "Ms. Guercio and Ms. Purificato wanted to get married because they wanted to be legally and socially recognized as a family" (Braff). The second couple is Kema Barton and Debe Brown, married and raising their children together; their relationship is purely platonic. They have never been involved romantically and feel free to explore intimacy with other people.

They decided to make it official because they wanted to build a family together, to raise their children together, and to make all their major choices as a unit. They're in the process of buying a house and getting a joint bank account. Their children consider each other brother and sister, and they call each woman Mom (Braff).

It seems that there is something to consider in the possibility of marrying a good female friend and enjoying the benefits brought to both individuals, especially if they are not joined together romantically. This type of platonic marriage in which both people join their bank accounts, raise children together, and rely on each other for support and companionship is a new form of going against compulsory heterosexuality. I think it is important to note that a pattern found in these platonic friendships is that the people involved in them are queer, and I did not find any instances in this article which two men best friends were getting married platonically, only women.

In our society it seems that people prioritize marriage over other types of relationships, marriage is perhaps the only way to make a relationship "official." Although there are many fables

about it, there is no clear history of how and when marriage was first created (Coontz 34-35).

By the time we have written records of the civilizations that arose in the ancient world, marriage had become the way most wealth and land changed hands. Marriage was also the main vehicle by which leading families expanded their social networks and political influence. It even sealed military alliances and peace treaties (Coontz 48).

Today, marriage is still a way couples trade goods, provide for each other, and work on some type of exchange, even if that exchange is just taking care of their children and sex. When two people get legally married, they agree to several things they have to do for each other; whether they follow through with these agreements or not is a different story. In Rich's words, "[w]omen have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women..." (Rich, 654). Most women marrying and forming relationships with men have been influenced by compulsory heterosexuality, at least to some degree. Even if they are heterosexual, they have never questioned it since it is the norm to be heterosexual.

Unlike marriage, friendships do not have legal contracts that unite them in exchange for anything; they do not have the same responsibilities that marriages have. Yes, some friendships have some kind of interest that keeps them existing. According to Axel Honneth's book *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*,

Friendship constitutes an institutionalized form of pre-reflexive commonalities marked by the implicit desire to reveal our own feelings and attitudes without reservation. The role obligations of which we are implicitly aware intertwined in a way that ensures mutual trust and the certainty that even our most idiosyncratic and odd desires will be taken seriously and not be betrayed (Honneth 139-40).

By their own will, both parties must be fully there for the other person. When they persist for a

long time together, their bond can be powerful. In many cases, friendships last from before one gets married, through the marriage, and even after divorce. Indeed many women today realize that what they are looking for in marriage might be provided instead by close friends (Oliker 154). I asked my interviewees if they think a woman can have a happy and fulfilled life if she/they have solid friendships but don't have a stable partner, and all of them gave a strong "yes, definitely" for an answer, except for one. This person said that they would like to think so, that yes, it is possible, but in their experience, as they grow older, they have been feeling pressured by society to find a stable partner to be successful and move on in their life. This participant said that in her opinion she could be happy with only the support of friends, but the people around her will make her feel that she is missing something, and this pressure is what could make her feel like she could not have a happy and successful life until she finds a partner and has kids.

Although it is not often discussed, people can suffer from heartbreak from losing a close friend. Therefore, I decided to ask my interviewees about friendship breakups. I asked them if they believed that losing a friend could hurt more, as much, or less than losing a romantic partner. Most of them said that it could hurt as much, and it all depends on how strong these friendships were and how serious the romantic relationships were. They noted that in many cases, one could form serious attachments to girlfriends due to all the experiences, love, and support that they had put into the relationship. Losing them can feel awful because it is like losing a part of themselves, something very similar to what many claim happens with the loss of a romantic relationship. Only one interviewee said that in her experience, losing a friend can hurt more than losing a romantic partner. According to this interviewee, it is expected and accepted of people to go through a process of getting over a romantic partner, but this is never the case with a close friendship, which can make the process a lot more painful due to the lack of understanding of others.

Sadly, losing a friend can also mean that that friend has passed away. A study by Elizabeth

Sauber of women's grief after losing a close friend stated that most of these women felt that they were being neglected from the mourning process — everything from making decisions and helping in mourning rituals to having their feelings validated by the family of the deceased (Sauber 33–34). In Sauber's study, participants were interviewed in small focus groups, all were women who lost a female friend (not part of their family) not too long before the study was conducted. When asked about the grieving process, one participant described that she did not receive enough support when losing her friend, that most of the support was focused on her friend's spouse. Another participant claimed that she could have provided support when her very close friend was very sick and about to die, but that her friend's family members did not contact her (33). It is during these critical moments, when life decisions are made (or death decisions in this case), that a spouse is one of the most responsible figures to make decisions because it is legally signed in the marriage contract that they will do so. And by no means am I implying that people should stop getting married, but I cannot help but wonder how could a best friend be involved in these decisions without being perceived as too invasive? How can they be respected as an essential part of the person's life if there are no legal documents or any type of confirmation to prove that they might know what is best for their best friend? According to Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" discussed above, lesbian existence, which includes for Rich non-romantic women-women friendships, "comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right access to women" (Rich 649). Maybe if we shift our focus to validating friendships, both of my questions could be explored with ease.

In her essay, Rich talks about how in many (if not most) cases, women help other women in challenging situations:

Yet it is the women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other. (I am trying to find my strength

through women - without my friends, I could not survive) (656).

Having a partner and getting married are norms in our society, and a lot of the reasoning behind it is that we need someone who can give us constant support and companionship. However, in many instances, support and company can be received and shown to our closest friends. It could be argued that as people get older, they want a partner to receive constant company; many people do not want to grow old alone. But that person does not necessarily have to be a romantic partner; they can also be a friend. A study by McDill et al. on heterosexual women over forty who never married reported that most of them were highly satisfied with their lives (McDill et al. 44). Additionally, these women said they highly valued their relationships with their family and friends for support and companionship (46). Although many women feel pressured by their social circles to get married, especially more than men (Blakemore et al. 327), this study showed that women could have highly satisfactory lives unmarried. They can find support and companionship through other social nets. Another article supports this finding by stating that “older adults living without a partner are unlikely to be lonely when they receive relatively high levels of friendship support. In other words, the presence of supportive relationships can compensate for the loss or the absence of a partner” (Dykstra S327).

An essential part of the interviews was hearing how my interviewees have found support in their lives through their female friends. I asked them to tell me about times when they have found strength, love, and support from girlfriends. It is fascinating to see how their answers varied among them. For example, one interviewee said that she felt support from a female work friend because after a talk they had during which my interviewee told her friend about her life and career goals, this friend (without being asked to do so), decided to connect her with many people in their industry that she thought would help her advance in her career. On the other hand, a different

interviewee said that they⁴ felt strength, love, and support from their female best friends during the Covid-19 pandemic, a time that affected their mental health. They believed that talking about a specific situation was not a good portrayal of how significant their friend's support was for them because they were all small things that made them realize that they were loved and cared for.

The media and the society we live in make it seem very common for girls to compete with each other. Leora Tanenbaum's book *Catfight: Women and Competition* gives a great insight into why women compete with each other and how we have been raised to see each other as competition and not collaborators. Tenenbaum states that competition between women starts by wanting the approval of men.

As women, we come to believe that male approval is more significant than female approval, and that a relationship with a man confers more status than a relationship with a woman.

Thus many women believe that supporting other women is suicidal if they want to achieve success in a male-dominated milieu (48).

Tanenbaum argues that without women's competition over men, or if "women ruled the world" (44), women would still compete with each other, yet it would be a different type of competition. Hopefully, this would be a healthy constructive competition, and collaboration would be celebrated. Competition among women is indeed real, but how about women collaborating with and wishing the best for their female friends. I believe that focusing on competition between women creates an idea in people's minds that it is the norm, when in many instances, it is not; women can be the biggest supporters for their female friends.

I asked my interviewees about competition among female friends, and their answers were also very positive. I believe that this is in part because the women I interviewed already came with

⁴ This interviewee's pronouns are they/she, they prefer the pronoun they.

the idea that female friendships were meaningful, and they had a positive perspective of them. I first asked them in which areas have they experienced competition with their female friends. Following that question, I asked them in what areas they have experienced support instead of competition. A few of them believed that they had experienced and witnessed competition regarding men or boys when they were younger. A few declared that there is always the pressure to be coupled up. Tanenbaum's book *Catfight* dedicates a whole chapter to competition between women in dating. Tanenbaum claims that men have an easier time with being single, and that the stereotypes and pressure put upon single men are not as strong as they are for women. "Women compete with each other over men because we have been subjected to a relentless message that a woman can only be fulfilled through a romantic coupling with a man" (Tanenbaum ch. 3). Tanenbaum also discusses in this chapter that even when a woman is in a relationship, she can still compete with her partner's exes.

Tanenbaum also points out other types of competition that are common in women. For example, the competition of beauty, which in American beauty standards has been ruled by idealizing being thin, young, and white. In this chapter the author provides a comprehensive analysis of how the beauty standard had originated, the pressures they put on women, and she reviews eating disorders and cosmetic surgery. Finally, Tanenbaum claims that only a few women can fit this standard of beauty temporarily. "The overwhelming majority of us continue to hurt ourselves—physically and psychically—in an effort to win the tacit beauty contest that infuses our daily lives" (Tanenbaum ch. 2). My interviewees in their majority had opposing views to Tanenbaum's ideas; they said that they and their friends support in each in terms of beauty by lifting each other up and by making sure that their female friends feel beautiful and confident in their own bodies.

As mentioned before, the media can be a big influence on how relationships between

women are seen. Movies and TV shows constantly portray competition and cattiness between women. In her book *Girlfriends and Postfeminist Sisterhood*, Alison Winch goes over many popular TV shows and movies and evaluates the relationships women have in them. She mentions reality TV shows in which women compete with each other to be approved by other women.

“These reality television formats tease out and make overt any feminine rivalry as a short cut to generating entertainment value and in order to court prurience from viewers. This is problematic as it plays on a misogynist understanding of the catfight, where women can only position themselves as rivals” (Winch 157). I asked my interviewees if they believed that the media portrayed real-life competition between female friends, and the answers were varied. A few of them said that it is both ways, some women act the way it is seen on TV, and that is why movies and TV shows depict these relationships like that, but at the same time, some women (particularly younger women in middle school or high school) imitate what they see; therefore they act that way, but not because they are inherently competitive with other women, but because they are imitating what they see, thinking that’s how they will get to be popular or get what they want. A few other interviewees believe that the media, in reality, exaggerates the way competition between women is in real life to add to the dramatization that is needed to make a show or movie enjoyable, but it is not a reflection of real-life relationships.

A few interviewees confessed that they were tired of seeing such an incorrect and negative depiction of female friendships in the media. They said they look for entertainment that shows positive relationships between women, more authentic and genuine friendships like those in real life and that they feel hopeful to see more coming out in the following years. One of my interviewees attributed this negative view of females in general in the media to the fact that most of them are written, directed, and produced by white straight men, who do not understand and have not lived the perspectives that they are referring to in their work. This interviewee hopes to see a

change in that as the film and media industry becomes more diverse.

One interesting tool used to evaluate if a movie or film is considered feminist is “The Bechdel test.”

The Bechdel Test consists of three questions to objectively determine the representation of women in a movie and if a woman’s role can exist independent of a man’s role. In order to pass the Bechdel Test, a movie must meet three related criteria: (1) it must have at least two women with names; (2) these named women must talk to each other; and (3) in their conversations, the named women must talk about something other than a man (Fogel and Criscione 68).

Although the Bechdel test does not specifically refer to female friendships in films, it is a good step towards raising consciousness in the film industry to make movies more equalitarian in terms of representation of diverse genders.

A lot of what women studies had entailed in my experience was studying feminism. It was difficult for me to find literature discussing the relationship between female friendships and feminism, and so I asked my interviewees about it, given that they are feminists and have positive views on female friendships. I asked them how they thought friendships could be feminist and all of their answers went in the same direction. They believed that the shared everyday experiences between women made friendships feminist, particularly experiences of sexism. Although men can listen and try to understand these experiences, women can empathize with them more. They also expressed that a female friendship could be feminist in their daily practice, such as women taking care of each other. For example, they make sure their friends are okay when getting home late, or at any time of the day; and they support them and listen to them when they experience some form of harassment on the streets, at work, or in any place. Many of my interviewees believed that just being there for each other and lifting each other up is feminist, especially since we live in a world

that is constantly trying to tear us apart.

The video I created for my capstone project depicted different women's experiences with female friendships. They discussed the benefits and positive outcomes of these relationships and the negative experiences that can come from them. In all of the discussions, the subjects I spoke with found female friendships beneficial and constructive. For example, a couple of the interviewees talked about how their close friends encouraged them to fulfill their goals and strive for more. They also discussed many instances when they found support from their female friends and how exceptional this support was for them. On the other hand, when they had negative experiences, they did not blame female friendships, but they faulted specific individuals or behaviors. They talked about their negative experiences with girlfriends, how they can be catty and competitive, but besides this, they all still believed that female friendships are crucial for women's lives.

It was definitely challenging for me to edit this film because of all the good material I had to work with; the eight interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour and a half, averaging in 50 minutes per interview. The experiences of all the interviewees were incredibly valuable and showed many different perspectives, and therefore I had to be careful in choosing what was going on the video and what I would leave out. I wanted to depict a wide range of experiences, but at the same time, I wanted to show that there are a lot of similarities of opinions and perspectives. The first draft of the video was originally one hour and a half, and after a lot of revisions and careful consideration, it ended up at 33 minutes. There is the possibility that in the future I release an extended version of this film because I was captivated by all the angles that the questions were viewed from, and all the information shared was inspiring and spoke in high regards of female friendships.

In conclusion, I found that female friendships are not only important, but necessary for women. They can help women advance as a group and as individuals, it is valuable to have people who have lived the similar experiences and can relate to one's struggles. Friendships in many cases are long lasting relationships, they provide community and love to many people and can be more honest than romantic relationships or familial relationships. Female friendships have positively impacted all my interviewees and I believe this is the case for many more women around the world as well. I am pleased to know that there are women who also know about the power behind female friendships, and I hope that in the future more people can acknowledge them as crucial parts of our lives.

INTERVIEW GUIDES

1. What is friendship?
2. Why do you think it is important for women to have women friends?
3. Could you give an example of a situation when you have found strength, love, and support from a female friend?
4. As you get older, how important do you think it is to have close female friends in your life?
5. Do you experience friendships with different genders differently? And if so, how so?
6. Do you think you can have a female best friend and a romantic partner simultaneously and maintain both relationships successfully? If yes, why do you think it is hard for some women to do this?
7. Do you think a women can have a happy and fulfilled life if they have strong friendships, but don't have a stable partner? Why or why not?
8. Do you think losing a close female friend can hurt as much, less, or more than losing a romantic partner? Why?
9. Have you (or someone you know) had to go through a friendship break-up? Could you talk about this experience?
10. In your experience with female friends, in what areas have you seen competition between each other, and in what areas have you seen support instead of competition?
11. Do you think that popular TV shows and movies, and media portray real-life competition between friends? Could you give some examples?"
12. How do you think that a female friendship can be feminist?
13. Is there anything you would like to add as we come to the close of this interview?

CONSENT FORM

Consent to participate in interview

Topic: Friendship and Feminism – The importance of female friendships

I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this capstone project.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that participation involves being video recorded and then having my video used for a documentary film about female friendships.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this film.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction.

Printed Name

Participants Signature

Date

Producer Signature

Date

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