



Sisterhood and the 4th wave of feminism: An analysis of circles of women in Poland

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Abstract

This article aims at contributing to the discussion on sisterhood in the theoretical framework of the feminist debate. In particular, it advances the discussion on sisterhood with respect to the three waves of feminism, by providing a description of the new approach to sisterhood framed by the categories of the fourth wave of feminism. Drawing on an empirical qualitative study on the circles of women (CW) in Poland, this research explores the changing quality of sisterhood by investigating women's mutual relationships, and the development of women's subjectivity. Specifically, the evolution of mutual relationship among women is demonstrated by the increased trust and development of solidarity while the strengthening of subjectivity by the increase of self-acceptance.

Key words

4th wave of feminism; sisterhood; circle of women

Resumen

Este artículo pretende contribuir al debate sobre la sororidad en el marco teórico del debate feminista. En concreto, impulsa el diálogo sobre sororidad respecto a las tres olas del feminismo, al aportar una descripción del nuevo abordaje de la sororidad en el marco de las categorías de la cuarta ola del feminismo. Partiendo de un estudio empírico cualitativo de los círculos de mujeres de Polonia, esta investigación explora la cualidad cambiante de la sororidad, al indagar en las relaciones entre las mujeres y el desarrollo de la subjetividad de la mujer. Concretamente, la evolución de las relaciones mutuas entre las mujeres queda demostrada por la creciente confianza y el avance de la

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solidaridad al tiempo que se refuerza la subjetividad mediante una mayor aceptación de una misma.

Palabras clave

Cuarta ola del feminismo; sororidad; círculo de mujeres

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1. Introduction

In recent times we observed qualitative changes in women's movements and an increase of their activity. The 4th wave of feminism is becoming more popular and more established as a paradigm (Chamberlain 2017). "Sisterhood" becomes a trendy word again: its presence is highly visible on the Internet, the media and women's bottom-up movements. However, the way the word "sisterhood" is currently used indicates not only a renaissance of sisterhood, but also a reformulation of its idea with respect to what we know from the history of women's movements.

The main focus of the article is the novel approach to sisterhood that is developing in a special "conscious raising" group: the circle of women. Specifically, I argue that the main characteristics of this approach are: 1) a change in the relationship among women with respect to the previous waves of feminism and 2) a development of autonomy and subjectivity of women in the circles. In the first part of the article I will introduce the history of the concept of the sisterhood. Next, I will describe the history and the idea that stands behind CW with the special focus on the activity of Polish CW. Finally, drawing on empirical data I will analyze how relationships between women changed due to the participation to the circles and what factors influenced them. This will allow to build up the definitions and the condition for the sisterhood in the context of the 4th wave of feminism.

Framing the analysis of sisterhood in the CW in the 4th wave of feminism is justified not only by the fact that this is becoming the dominant interpretative paradigm of current women/gender projects, but also because the CW could be considered one instance of "consciousness raising" groups, that are particularly relevant for this paradigm (Blevins 2018). In addition, social media and on-line groups, facilitating the interaction among women, are another salient feature of the 4th wave of feminism (Rampton 2008) which is also crucial for the analysis of CW. In fact, online interaction is becoming a crucial feature of the CW. Finally, the topics of fundamental interest for the 4th wave of feminism like women's body, women's individual autonomy and sisterhood itself, are adequate to carry out the analysis in the CW.

The renaissance of sisterhood, springing as a reaction to the neoconservative tendencies that showed up in many societies, benefited from the development of the on-line "free" zones on the Internet, which provided a forum for discussions and contributed to build the so-called "call out culture" (Munro 2013). Significant changes in terms of sisterhood are visible in the way women organize themselves, and in the change of the relationship between them. In particular, women found in Internet a safe space to express their voices in women's groups, in which they had the chance to see other women in a new different way, beyond the patriarchal stereotypes. This significantly contributed to a qualitative change in women's movements.

Online social networks allowed women to create networks of mutual support and to strengthen their awareness. Circles of women (Longman 2018), in the analysis proposed here, can be identified with consciousness-raising groups characterized by bell hooks as informal, non-hierarchical, inclusive gatherings for women in different communities, where women can heal from daily injustices, sexism and social inequalities (hooks 2000, p. 7). Circles of women typically meet in person. However, getting connected through the Internet and social media, not only facilitates joining the group and organizing the

meetings, but also allows staying constantly in touch with each other between the meetings. Frequent interaction appears as a strong factor in strengthening the bonds among the CW participants.

Finally, analysing the CW as a “consciousness raising” group is of high importance, as *centralized feminism*, which was specific to the 1st, 2nd and 3rd wave of feminism, was never particularly popular in Poland. Feminism was traditionally situated at the opposition to the Catholic church, which stresses the importance of women in the family (Graff 2001). Differently, the meetings of this grassroots movement such as the CW are not connected to any ideology, which can explain its growing popularity among Polish women.

2. Sisterhood

Sisterhood in the feminist discourse of all the four waves remains equally important (Lugones and Rosezelle 1995). The history of feminist movements shows sisterhood progressing and regressing, but it is always at the heart of the discourse: it was sometimes supported and developed, or criticized and rejected.

The two main characteristics of sisterhood emerging from the feminist discussion are the following: i) a concern with identity, exemplified by questions such as: who is the sister? What does it mean to be a sister? This represents the basis for the construction of a *collective identity*. ii) An emphasis on solidarity, declined into the acts of sharing, supporting each other, cooperating. These two issues, however, were tackled in different ways across the four waves of feminism.

The 1st wave, as it was fully essentialist, understood sisterhood as a type of coalition or union among women, to make them feel stronger together. The reference was to the position of men, and the emphasis on being equal to them. As a result, sisterhood was understood as a common front to compete with men. According to this approach all women have the same interests to fight for changing their subordinated position (Hannam 2007, pp. 49–50, Zaytoun and Ezekiel 2016). In short, what sisters have in common is a shared experience of oppression caused by male patriarchy.

The 2nd wave criticized this sort of *equity feminism*. In particular, a claim was made for taking distance between generations, exemplified by the slogan: “I am not the sister of my mother” (Henry 2004). This also implies an idea of feminist sisterhood based on horizontal relationships between women, instead of a vertical one, such as the one based on generations. In this perspective non-hierarchical relations between women become important. In addition, the 2nd wave started the discussion on what it means to be a sister. In particular, according to the essentialist approach of the 1st wave, to be a sister means to be a female, which implies that a proper feminist has to be female. However, this approach to sisterhood highlights a racist aspect of sisterhood, as oppression and exploitation of women on other women can take place (Evans 2015). So, the topic of competition occurs as the central element of the discussion (Simons 1979). The key question then becomes: “when do women start to support each other?”

The 3rd wave of feminism, and especially bell hooks, brought sisterhood on another level of discussion emphasizing the context of patriarchal society that disables sisterhood to take place (Evans 2015). Specifically, bell hooks’ claim that femininity as defined by men is sexist and, as such, becomes part of regular women’s life (hooks 1986). In addition, we

can observe that women bond more to a sexist society to which they have been socialized, and internalized male supremacist values as degenerative, competitive behavior. Women internalized male way of acting by competing with each other, and for the same reason, they were accused of collaboration with men. bell hooks, therefore, expresses a strongly critical position towards sisterhood. According to bell hooks, to revitalize the sisterhood differences among women should be confronted, and bonding between them should be based on political commitments to a feminist movement that ends the sexist oppression. To achieve this goal, female consciousness should be transformed (Hooks 1986).

Although the 4th wave of feminism has not received much scientific attention so far (Chamberlain 2016), despite having reached high popularity in the media and in the social networks (Zimmerman 2017), its main characteristics can be defined as an anti-essentialist approach including all people, also men in the discourse on sisterhood. In light of this, the most important question is not what women or individuals of all gender have in common, but what the conditions to build the bonds between each other are, taking into account the diversity among the members of the group.

The results of the research presented here contribute to answering this question. The empirical investigation, in particular, might shed a new light on the feminist discussion on the topic. In the next section we describe the context where the analysis was carried out: the circle of women.

3. The idea and the roots of the circle of women

The tradition of the circle of women, also known as red tent, moon hut, black hut, women's hut of healing power, exists in the indigenous Indian tradition and in other cultures. Women gathered in the red tents during menstruation to stay together and go together through the changes in their bodies, usually during full moon. In this way female bodies synchronized with each other and with the moon cycles. There are thirteen menstrual cycles as there are thirteen moon cycles during the year (not twelve like in the traditional calendar). During this time shared together, women used to rest to respect the rhythm of the body's cycle and supported each other experiencing sisterhood (Sams 2012, p. 21). The red tent became a space where women gathered to share their experiences, very often painful stories from the bottom of the heart, to support, heal each other (Sams 2012, p. 21) and build small communities.

The most important principle of the circle is *storytelling*, organized by the procedure of the "talking stick" (Hodge *et al.* 1996). This procedure allows women to tell their stories, to reveal the harm suffered, and to be recognized. The emphasis here is on staying together as a community, going together through the healing group process with care, respect and support, to find recognition and reconciliation. There is no possibility to comment, evaluate or argue about the topics discussed in the circle. This rule allows women to speak freely about things which would be publicly revealed by a courageous individual only, or just spoken privately. Such a group process gives the possibility to gain recognition and heal the wounds not only at the individual level, but also favor collective change. That is, letting free the suppressed stories challenges the collective myth on the role of women in the community.

The grassroots activity of the CW results in the building of small communities. The phenomenon of CW sets a new trend in the functioning of women's movements as an empowerment activity, whose foundations are rooted in what is called "feminine qualities" or "deep feminine", is a part of both masculine and feminine heritage and are listed as follows: cooperation, collaboration, feeling, intuition, grounding, including, transforming, empathizing, assembling and communicating. While male qualities are: competing organizing, focusing, planning, discovering, achieving, solving, questioning, specializing (Elworthy 2014).

The tradition of the red tents is also described in a novel of Anita Diamant entitled *The red tent* (Diamant 1997), while the book on the *13 Clan Mothers* (Sams 2012) points out that red tents were present in the tradition of indigenous Indians from America.¹ In particular, Sams (2012) shows that the tradition of the red tent survived in the Seneca tribe despite the long period of European influences which brought, *inter alia*, patriarchal domination into the tribe. However, the teaching of the Seneca tribe is a role model for both men and women in the communities because, as they claim, everything is born from female energy (Sams 2012). The tradition of indigenous tribes teaches that women should not follow male roles in the communities, and should not run feminist movements using traditional male strategies based on competition and the struggle for achievements, but they should grow their internal female strength, for example by following the teaching indicated in the book of the *13 Clan Mothers*. Women who are not taught to respect their own internal source of strength may get lost following the path of the warriors, which is the path of male power. The lessons of the *13 Clan Mothers* teach to remember the forgotten women's heritage and to respect the Mother Earth. Women's heritage and Mother Earth are in danger until women fully recognize their own path and internalize it *through the change of their behavior* (Sams 2012, p. 20). "13 Clan Mothers" represents thirteen aspects of femininity which women should develop in order to retrieve their forgotten female nature.²

¹ The literature on the topic of CW is small. The novel of Diamant (1997) stands out as an important contribution that affected the contemporary reception of circles around the world and inspired women in Europe to gather in the circles of women and create a women grass-root movement. Other contributions are: Leidenfrost (2012), a Ph.D. thesis accompanied by documentary, and Baldwin (2009), a book for a broader audience on the practices and functioning of CW. The recent work of Longman (2018), based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with the CW's participants, analyzes the CW as raising women's spirituality in the context of post secular and liberal society in the Western Europe.

² The Thirteen mothers are: **Talks with the relation** is the Clan Mother of the FIRST Moon Cycle and is the Keeper of learning the truth. **Wisdom Keeper** is the Protectress of Sacred Traditions, the Mother of Friendship, Planetary Unity and Mutual Understanding. **Weighs The Truth** is the Mother of Truth, Self-determination, and Responsibility. **Looks Far Woman** is the Mother of Visions, Dreams and Psychic Impressions. **Listening Woman** is the Mother of Tiyoweh, the Stillness and Inner Knowing, **Storyteller** is the Guardian of Medicine Stories, **Loves All Things** is the Mother of Unconditional Love and All Acts of Pleasure. **She Who Heals** is the Mother of Intuition/All Rites of Passage/Cycles of Birth, Death and Rebirth, **Setting Sun Woman** is the Mother of the Proper Use of Will/Will to Live. **Weaves The Web** is the Mother of Creativity, Manifester of Dreams, **Walks Tall Woman** is the Mother of Beauty and Grace, the Keeper of Innovation and Persistence, **Gives Praise** is the Mother of All Acts of Thanksgiving and Encouragement, **Becomes Her Vision** is the Mother of the Alchemical Changes and Rites of Passage into Wholeness.

3.1. *The tradition of the Polish circles of women*

Polish CW were primarily inspired by the tradition of indigenous Seneca Indians from the Western part of Northern America, based on the teaching of Grandmother Twylah Nitsch (Sams and Nitsch 1991), the leader of the Wolf Clan. She taught how to make circles of women which were based/inspired by women's councils.

Among the students of Twylah Nitsch was Mattie Davis-Wolf, who belongs to the elders of indigenous tribe of Northern America, and Danuta Ogaoeno, who followed the teaching of healing and purifying by Siberian shamans. They initiated gathering of circles of women in Poland in the nineties and passed on the teaching to other Polish women. One of them was Tanna Jakubowicz Mount. As she said: "[M]eetings with Indians (Mattie and Danuta) brought us a hope that except the political transformation that was going on in Poland at that time, we can make internal transformation in the circle with other women renewing values which were forbidden during the communist regime, like freedom, self-determination (...)"³ In 2004 Mattie Davis-Wolf passed to Tanna Jakubowicz Mount the right to lead the circles of women. The meeting with the native Indians brought inspiration to the Polish participants. One of them, Maria Ela Lewańska, translated the book *13 Original Clan Mothers* into Polish, making it a key reference for the Polish circles of women for years.

Another important pillar of the spread of the idea of circles of women in Poland is Anija Miłńska. She also participated in a famous shamanic workshop at the beginning of 90s. But after some time of holding the circles according to the Indian tradition, she adapted them to the European culture. Looking for the roots of European women's spirituality and culture Anija Miłńska realized that there was a strong need of powerful female figures, including a figure of a mother. Through her work with fairy tales such as *Cinderella* in the circles of women, she realized that the loving mother was substituted by the evil stepmother which became the ruling mother internalized by the majority of women. Eventually, she found a positive ruling model embodied by Persephone in the Greek culture, and started the process of restoring her place into women culture and into the social reality through organizing mysteries (*misteria*) as part of the CW's activity.⁴

Circles of women are spreading in Poland thanks to the above-mentioned women leaders, who devoted their life activity to healing the relationships among women and building sisterhood. Agata Dutkowska, together with Tana Jakubowicz Mount, initiated the action *Let's Cover All Poland with the Circles*. The Facebook group *Kobiety zwołujące kręgi* (Women who hold the circles), is composed of by around 3,300 women. There is a list of 46 circles in Poland and Polish women organizing circles abroad.

3.2. *The rules of the circle*

In this section we summarize the rules that are followed in contemporary CW in Poland.

1. Equality: all participants are equal and are submitted to the same rights and obligations, including a leading woman.
2. Communication at the heart level: participants are encouraged to share important vivid stories which are touching the heart level at the very moment

³ Based on interview with Tanna Jakubowicz Mount made in May 2017.

⁴ Interview with Anija Miłńska, 22.03.2018.

of the meeting. Participants should listen to other women with empathy and no judgment. Tentative presence in the circle starts with lack of criticism and evaluation of ourselves.

3. Everyone has the right to speak freely or express herself in other ways like dancing, singing, reading poetry, etc. Alternatively, one can stay in silence. Free expression goes hand in hand with a “no harm” principle.
4. A "Talking stick" indicates who has a right to talk at the very moment. It goes from hand to hand of every woman in the circle following the moon cycles. Handling a talking stick guarantees that nobody can interrupt the expression of a given person.
5. It is not allowed to scream, shout or discuss with others. Seneca Indians used to say that there is a fire in the middle of the circle which belongs to our children and noise may block the energy. Its high importance lies in the healing power of the circle which reaches seven past and future generations.
6. Finally, the participants must not give advice to others. This is the best way to interrupt individual development of the person and should be avoided. Participants can always share their own experiences which correspond to touching experiences of others by saying, e.g.: “In my case it went this way (...)”.
7. And what follows: women in the circle are the mirrors for each other.

4. The empirical analysis of CW in Poland: Methodology

This project combines a mixed methodology as an empirical study followed by a theoretical analysis, notably through surveys and questionnaires and in-depth and semi-structured interviews (Miller and Glassner 1997, pp. 99–112). Based on the answers to the research, delivered by the participants, the group for in-depth interviews was selected. The in-depth and multiple interviews were made both with the chosen participants and the circles holders.

4.1. Characteristics of the studied groups

The questionnaires were published in the Facebook group *Kobiety zwołujące kręgi* (Women who hold the circles), composed by around 3,300 women, which contains the list of the circles in Poland, indicating 46 active circles.⁵ This allowed to collect 70 questionnaires filled by the participants of the group. Subsequently, 20 additional women from another CW who meet in person in a Polish city⁶ were contacted for the in-depth and multiple interviews. The research group was composed of by women: 95% of them were highly educated, 67 % were active professionals and 72% went through an individual therapy.

A primary aim is answering the central questions of the research: how do the participants of CW understand sisterhood and femininity? In particular the questions were formulated as follows: What changed in the perception of yourself during the participation in the CW? What did you realize as it comes to realizing your life path? How has your sense and perception of femininity changed during the circle? What is

⁵ Check on the FB page was made in November 2020.

⁶ To protect anonymity of the respondents, complete details are omitted.

femininity for you now? What has changed in your perception of your own body and its acceptance? (e.g. attitude to menstruation, responding to body needs and messages, attire, nutrition, etc.) What has changed in your relationship with other women? What does cooperation and trust in other women look like?

Responses point out a significant impact of the CW on the following areas of women's life: self-perception (95% of women indicated the perception of change), attitude towards their bodies (64%), relationships with other women (99%).

4.2. Analyzing the answers

In this section I analyze the answers to the questionnaires and the interviews in order to highlight the following aspects: the relationships with other women and the development of women's subjectivity in order to reconstruct their understanding of sisterhood. In particular, the interviews with "the elders" allow to reconstruct the narration of interviewed women to obtain a bigger picture of the processes women are going through during the meetings.

4.2.1. Change of the relationship among women

The most important result of the current study, emphasized by the vast majority of the women taking part in it as the greatest benefit they received from their participation to the circle was a positive change in the relationship with other women.

Women talk about changing relationships with other women comparing the experiences of relationships in their lives before participating in the circles with what has changed during the meetings in the circle. This experience, in the vast majority of cases,⁷ was defined as a "radical change in the quality of relationships".

Women describe the relationship with other women before joining the CW as based on competition or on fighting with themselves, openly or in a hidden way, by making false friendships. Such an approach was based on perceiving other women as enemies and/or on being scared by them. Women stressed that comparing themselves to other women was also part of this perceived sense of competition, albeit in a softer way, because it generated constant evaluation of themselves and a hierarchical positioning of themselves with respect to others.

Such treatment of oneself by a woman is a form of pressure and violence, understood as part of a patriarchal strategy of subordination to the pattern determining what it means to be a woman. Practicing at best adaptation to this pattern and constant positioning serves to exclude yourself or other women and promotes competition among women. According to one of the women, whose voice is representative of the whole group of respondents, participation in the circles changes the perception of women precisely in terms of internalized patriarchal perception:

I was surprised that women can be sympathetic to the other woman, that they do not only create false friendships, based on jealousy. I saw (in the CW) that women can treat each other with respect and can be counted on in critical situations."

⁷ 99% of the women interviewed declared to have experienced a change of attitude towards other women.

After the participation in the circle, women reported a radical change in their mutual perception and in their overall experience, as in the above quote. In particular, they reported that after participating in the circle they perceived significant increases of mutual trust. The overall picture from the research indicates that increased trust results from the combination of the following elements: (a) significant increase of self-acceptance and acceptance of other women; (b) significant increase of mutual support, solidarity in their interactions and a bigger role for collaboration.

This shift of attitude towards an increase in mutual trust thanks to self-acceptance can be represented well by this voice:

Other women made me experience that I can be both strong and weak in their presence and they are not afraid of this. So, I have started to trust them in a healthy way, and I did not trust them at all before. I used to hate other women and consider them as fake (me included). Now I feel much more safe and comfortable in the company of other women than ever before. Also, I have really really close female friends now and I know that I can count on them anytime no matter the topic. Deeply in my heart I know they will not judge me, and this is what gives me relief (...).

What is very particular to the CW, visible in this quote, is that the turn of perception was made after the experience of being fully visible to other women, with all their own strengths and weaknesses. What the woman received as a feedback of her personal coming out made her feeling safe. Showing themselves fully and receiving a recognition of the “hidden, suppressed parts of the heart”, differently from what was usually presented or expressed within the predefined social roles made women felt accepted, in comparison to what they used to experience before.

As the further proof of women’s feeling of being accepted, the descriptions of their bodies indicate that they felt relaxed in the company of other women, feeling much closer to them. One woman pointed out: “I love them! Women give me amazing energy, I get to know them all over again (...)”.

Women testified that they experienced other women in a new way. What was defined by patriarchal stereotypes and social roles attributing certain features according to the gender roles, released the suppressed parts of women’s soul. Hence, not only attributing strength to men and weakness to women, but also other women’s behaviors (like open confession of negative feelings towards other women), feelings (expressing all the emotions including anger) and perception (e.g. acceptance of other women) was a part of a new type of seeing and experiencing other women.

Freeing oneself from the patriarchal perception of femininity is well-illustrated by the following excerpt from the statement of one of the women:

I didn’t understand what femininity was at all. i.e. I associated it with painting myself, arranging hairstyles, highlighting the figure, taking care of appearance. Now femininity for me is self-acceptance and a good feeling with myself, the process through which I go as a biological woman, simple the process that I am right now.

Other women stressed that her understanding of femininity completely changed, and is now based on freedom, which means in particular to: “listen to myself, to follow my truth without imposing it on others. Femininity is the truth of every woman”. To use the participants’ words, they indicated this radical turn of self-perception as the

consequence of safely showing to others as follows: "I am worthy; I am my best friend; I have my way of life; My way of life is mine!; I am powerful, so are the others".

Women's voices indicate that, together with self-acceptance, a process of (re)building their subjectivity and autonomy opened up. Statements indicating self-determination and the internal decision-making process were very common in the material collected for the research.

Women stressed that in the CW they feel free to present themselves as they really are but also in the bigger picture than they usually do. In the circle they learn to accept the wholeness of human behaviors also belonging to women. This understanding of oneself as a woman brings a similar way of understanding the inner and social reality of men, looking at men as victims of patriarchy who have to go through their own healing process.⁸

The process of getting to know yourself and other women together with self-acceptance leads in the further steps towards the acceptance of others in their diversity. The acceptance of other women, in particular, was described as an increased acceptance of other women for being as they are: "I have more internal space for diversity", one woman said.

Let us also consider the following significant quote:

In my last circle I met amazing women, different, brave, full of dreams, open to sincere relationships and full of goodwill. Thanks to conversations with them, thanks to the work in a circle, I am more gentle in judging other women from outside the circle. I still judge them, but I feel that I become empathic as well. I stop being so harsh in judgments and I am more listening, less petty and I manage not to attach importance to many things (...). I began to appreciate the exchange of experiences, inspirations and mutual support. These qualities have become very important to me when dealing with my female friends. I also renewed my old and precious friendships and brought them back to life. I trust again.

To all appearances, experiencing personal freedom, getting to know hidden parts of personal expression and accepting them, opens the door to accepting the diversity of others.

The principles of holding the circle were crucial to facilitate the mentioned change in women's perception. The space of the circle as guarded by especially non-judgmental settings together with the "talking stick" procedure give women a voice and facilitate expressing themselves fully. This situation is far from a typical social interaction and to some extent it is artificial.

However, this safety zone is very supportive of women's needs in order to reassure that nobody will give advice, interrupt, argue, discuss, judge or criticize what has been said by them in the circle. As T. Jakubowicz Mount, the elder of CW said in the interview:

It is forbidden to give advice to somebody in the CW, as it closes the individual way of development. Everybody shall look for her own solution/medicine by her own, following her own intuition and work on developing self-confidence.

⁸ Many women emphasize the desire to meet with men in a circle in the future. Some women's circles took the first initiatives to organize mixed circles, however without spectacular success.

Coping and instructing, traits very widespread among women as those who provide help and assistance to others, however, has wider than patriarchal roots, indicating that there is a role model who knows better how a person should act, what her truth is and what is good for her. This situation serves to maintain immaturity among women, suggesting to them that there is always someone wiser who has access to the truth about them.

The fact that most of the women in the CW experienced a positive change in the relationships among them is due to the process of learning based on *mirroring*. A mirroring experience allows women to recognize themselves in the experiences of others, something that accelerates the process of seeing and liberating the same quality of experience in their personal experience. Thanks to the mirroring procedure women were able to see each other by their own eyes so what they thought about other women before turned out to be different. The result was to pull out the pre-defined stereotypes and sexism from the relationships between them. What many women insist on is that this "new" discovery was: "Strength, power and beauty... Other women are mirrors for me and, above all, an expression of strength, power and beauty."

4.2.2. Body acceptance

As a manifestation of changes in self-acceptance an aspect that emerged in the research is the transformation of perception of women's body, nutrition habits and dress code. When women were asked in a very general way about the changes towards their body in terms of its feeling, they reported very detailed answers addressing changes in relation to menstruation, responding to body needs, dress code and the nutrition habits.

In statements about their body, women emphasize, the increased acceptance for their bodies as they are, figures of different size and shapes, especially non-normative bodies. As one woman put it: "I fully accept my body, I love every trace of life reflected on it, I observe myself with curiosity, my cyclicity, the aging process".

Women mention that they established contact with their body, and what is particularly important, that some parts of the body were totally overlooked before, like breast or hips. Women indicate the stories shared by other women as a source of inspiration in the process of change, as the following quote illustrates:

... I began to see the needs of my breasts and them themselves. As a result, my acceptance of my figure and shapes increased enormously. I am more attentive to physical pleasure. I am less and less ashamed of my fascination with the female body and its beauty. I want to talk more and more about it.

Overlooking or treating a woman in an instrumental way turns into a process of reviving a body. This fundamental shift of perception concerns the body status and its function, which is to guide women by one's own individual wisdom and giving advice about her lifestyle or health treatment. The change in the perception of the body also takes place at the level of the diet. When it comes to nutrition habits, women report that they felt in the process of shifting to the healthier diet: "I already see effects, physical sensations, strengths, etc. (...). I try to eat only what I taste (sometimes even if I feel like something unhealthy, I do not feel internal remorse) and I enjoy the pleasure".

On the one hand, there appeared an increase in awareness about healthy food. This applies to how meals are prepared and from what type of ingredients. On the other hand, there appeared a tendency to find pleasure in feeding oneself and to treat meals as an expression of self-love. Such a sign suggests an increased level of self-acceptance and self-esteem. As one woman said: "I like my photos of the current and past (which I did not like before)".

What should be stressed here, in the case of women, is of particular importance, as the figure of the female breadwinner, the one who prepares meals for others and feeds them, begins to change. Women stress that it took some work to recognize the importance of self-feeding and taking care of themselves in this dimension as an important element of self-recognition. As one woman pointed out: "I have the pleasure of preparing meals for myself and feeding myself. I happen to feel love for myself and treat myself with love".

Another important topic of high importance concerning women's body is the menstrual cycle, which is not only a topic which takes off the shame and trauma associated with menstruation but transforms it into a theme of feminine wisdom and power. In the circle, women share stories about their menstrual cycle, express grief and mourning associated with the silencing of the first menstruation, as well as situations of violence and shame associated with this aspect of femininity. By giving each other support, they share their stories to understand the value and the wisdom of the monthly cycle. As one woman expresses: "I felt that the monthly cycle is not something external, that I am the cycle". This statement expresses a profound appreciation of the cyclicity of life, which is different for men and women. The cycle of a woman makes her subjected to the necessity of variability, which resembles cycles of nature and a reference to the wisdom of the earth. Respecting the body's cycles, or becoming a cycle is one of the types of understanding of femininity present in the culture of circles of women.

Finally, women stressed the importance in the changes of their dress-code. The change was not so much about what women put on themselves, but what their intention and purpose are in dressing up. What one woman said: "I only dress in things that I enjoy (...)" symbolizes liberating from the need to dress up for other people or according to circumstances. When it comes to choosing a style of dressing, women list the predominance of skirts and dresses as their attire, with rather long casual dresses. Such a choice also goes in the opposite direction to the much-liked miniskirts by the patriarchy.

4.2.3. Mutual support

In a patriarchal-based operating model, relationships between women have two levels: the first one is openly presented as friendly and supportive and has a hidden level based on competition and rivalry based on low trust. In fact, relations are dominated by the unspoken code based on competition and are called "fake alliances". Within this scope, it is possible to act at most within a specific common objective, if any. This was one of the arguments put forward by women who preferred to interact with men, as the male "rules of the game" are transparent and directly focus on reaching goals framed by the logic of losing and winning.

The emergence of a new type of relationship based on interaction confirms the establishment of trust in relationships among women. The cooperation takes place only

if there is a minimum level of trust which is needed to coordinate and plan activities (Gambetta 2000). What appears dominant in women's narratives as a manifestation of trust in their relationship is speaking about it in new terms of common support and sense of solidarity or collaboration, as the only dimension of their relationship, without the hidden level. As women's interactions have been reformulated, they were explicitly named as cooperation based on mutual support with respect to each other, which means consciously respecting their will and their limits and boundaries. Setting limits or expressing disagreement and different positions with respect to other members of the group are contained by the space of the circle, and this is what keeps the diverse group together but also conditions and favors the development of new attitudes among women. The following quote highlights this aspect:

Now my relationships at work regarding cooperation with girls have improved a lot. I understand them more, I give them more space to be as they are. I think of them with love and gratitude. I watch how their attitude towards me changes as through these actions they open up. This is wonderful! (...) I have sisters, I have my tribe!

How to explain this in relationships among women that occurred under the influence of participation in the circle? A very representing voice of women indicates that showing fully oneself is the way to increase the trust and through this to create safe bonds among women. Being authentic with others and being safely received strengthen the process of collaboration, common support and sense of solidarity. Women feel that they have much more in common that they were thinking they had before. As they said: "I know we are connected and we can howl like a she-wolf together", "I can feel a sister-like bond has awakened in me and other women, a closeness I have never seen before".

These voices represent a common tendency visible among women that the process of disclosure strengthens the identification of women's commonalities, bringing them together. Women said that they accompany and support each other in various, often difficult life situations such as giving birth or losing a baby, changing the life path on the personal or professional level, changes which, very often, are not supported by the families of women. As one woman said: "I am not worrying about whether I will feel bad one day. I know that I can count on these wonderful women who will simply sense that I need support".

What should be emphasized here is that women coming out with their experiences in a circle receive a mindful presence from the others, which make them feel welcome and accepted as they are without judgments and prejudices. And this is, according to them, the most important elements that makes *sisterhood* for women belonging to the circles: being together or stand together. One woman used the metaphor of the forest that represents sisterhood for her: when women stay together in their authenticity they create "a real connection, such as pine trees in the forest".

A pine-tree forest is usually very transparent. What can be seen in such a forest at first glance is primarily individual trees, not the forest. A forest with a low forest fleece at first promotes transparency and visibility of the individual tree. By comparison, one can imagine a forest in which the branches of trees penetrate each other, mingle on each other, grow into each other's space. The metaphor of the pine forest seems very accurate because it suggests that the basis of sisterhood is women's individual autonomy, which should be preserved as first. This is the starting point to be a sister to another woman.

5. Concluding remarks: Sisterhood in the circle of women

Summing up, the research indicates that, undeniably, belonging to the CW affected women in different, important domains: it increased their self-acceptance, and triggered a positive change in the relationship between women, in particular increasing trust among them.

First of all, the study shows that women, facilitated by the process of the circle, revise and redefine their existing picture of mutual relations based on the internalization of patriarchy. Re-seeing women who stand up to their truth and experience each other respectfully, without violent judgments, is a factor that builds mutual trust. Thanks to this, women get closer to each other and strengthen their individual subjectivity and autonomy, which is the starting point for the development of reciprocal support or solidarity. However, what is very specific to the group of CW, is that what they call sisterhood is based on being a tender and empathetic witness who receives other women, providing recognition to others in a reciprocal process. At this stage women experience differences among them and build an inclusive but diverse group. The fact that all the voices can speak fully and all of them can be heard is already solidarity. Solidarity is an elastic feeling of mutual sympathy (Rorty 2009).

Solidarity is not a symbiotic relationship among persons, but it implies building a bridge across diversity. According to Durkheim, solidarism dialectically combines contradictions, oppositions and differences. These differences, heteronomies and fragmentation, that can be sustained together, are conditions and criteria for solidarity (Luhmann 1982). Solidarity cannot be defined solely by its linguistic root, that is, "solid", referring to "stability", "uniformity".

Solidarity, in the group plays such an important role as a means of social integration comparable to the one played by as bureaucracy law or and, in societies at large. For these reasons, solidarity observed in the CW seems particularly attractive and fresh and can be fruitfully examined in discussions on integration processes that were never experienced in women's movements.

This context defines a new horizon for the discussion on sisterhood, as an approach to other women free of judgments understood also as creating (internal) space of acceptance for others to be as they are. This may create the transparent, honest mutual support based on empathy and understanding as an expression of free will and personal freedom. That may potentially stand for informed and full consent action.

On the basis of the results of the research, I formulate three points in relation to discussion on sisterhood, described as follows:

1. Sisterhood based on resentment and harm does not work, as it creates relationships understood as type of alliances between women in order to confront with the male oppression. Such an approach, related to the 1st wave of feminism, represents a very narrow concept of sisterhood, if any. The central questions about what women have in common, which in this case is solidarity against male oppression, implies very weak bonds as it does not focus on mutual relations, but is a strategy of shifting responses to "oppressive men" and empowering an army of injured slaves. This approach deeply involved the discourse of the victim and the perpetrator.

2. Sisterhood cannot be understood neither in a symbiotic way: the individual differences must necessarily be taken into account, so disagreement could be a necessary part of it. This, in particular, refers to the discussion of the 2nd wave, exemplified by the statement: "I am not the sister of my mother".
3. A sisterhood that works, i.e. that has really strong foundations, requires a form of common support, among women, based on mutual bonds. However, cultivating bonds and mutual support, as the description of the working of the circle of women shows, strongly depends on a development of individual autonomy and personal freedom, which leaves the space for diversity.

The above-mentioned features represent an empirically developed definition of sisterhood which can be an inspiration for feminist global trends, and representative of the 4th wave of feminism. In fact, this definition of sisterhood is consistent with the anti-essentialist approach of the 4th wave, which welcomes diverse experiences of all individuals that this approach fits to its general framework.

The phenomenon of CW is the exemplification of a consciousness-raising group influencing other women. CW are hubs for women who emancipate themselves in their own way not following male or patriarchal role models.

With respect to the CW in Poland, it is worth mentioning that during the National Strike of Women and intense street protests at the end of 2020 against the laws limiting abortion, CW actively contributed to the organization of the protests and provided significant assistance to the activists and organizers of Women's Strike. This signals the readiness of these essentially private groups of self-development for standing up in the public sphere, and represent a potential for political engagements.

For these reasons, I suggest that reflection on the internal functioning of the circles of women, as a "consciousness-raising" group and of its effects on the participants, finds an ideal context in the discussions carried out in the 4th wave of feminism. The very concept of sisterhood finds a new contextualization in the circles of women, allowing to highlight, better than in previous approaches, its strengths, and its potential to affect women's experiences in global societies characterized by "decentralized" feminism.

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