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# Friendship, gender and social participation

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For social scientists, friendship is a contradictory and complex phenomenon. It is an extraordinarily highly valued social bond, yet in certain societies and periods like our own it has undefined, perilous boundaries. Not only is it difficult to know where friendship begins and ends, it can also be transmuted into another kind of socially frowned-upon relationship, a conceptual slipperiness in which the beliefs and values prevailing in other spheres of social life connected to power, politics and gender play a key role.

I view friendship as a kind of dynamic and socially shaped interpersonal relationship governed by rules that serve as cultural scripts that specify the content, functions and opportunities of friendship. These scripts change meaning over time, space and people's socio-structural situation (Cucó, 1995 and 2023; Guichart, 2014).

Even though considerably more attention has been paid to it in recent decades, friendship continues to be understudied by the social sciences as a whole. Generally speaking, the social and scholarly discourses that have prevailed until quite recently betray a threefold bias in Western thinking that limits friendship to private domains, emotions and masculinity. However, these arbitrary boundaries conceal the fact that friendship necessarily contains both expressive and instrumental aspects, operates in both the public and private spheres and, being an interpersonal relationship, occurs equally among men and women. Fortunately, both the research and social dynamic have recently been dismantling the foundations of those assumptions and even pointing to progress in the opposite direction.

Developments in feminist studies have played a crucial role in this by allowing the invisible and undervalued world of friendship among women to blossom, partly rectifying the dominant

androcentric views. They have highlighted the ever-changing nature of the cultural value attributed to friendship among women: from being positively sanctioned among the British upper classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Roseneil, 2006), they became pathologised in the early twentieth century, a process that was accompanied by the increasing idealisation of friendship and companionship that was supposed to feature in heterosexual couples (Faderman, 1985).

The feminist movement, specifically radical feminism from the 1960s and 1970s, has also played an important role in the process of reassessing friendship among women and enhancing the relationship's transformative capacity. This impact dovetails with the outcome of the accelerated changes seen in recent decades, which have increased the importance and social significance of friendship, promoting a new cultural emphasis on what is known as 'post-heterorelational friendship' and a popular celebration of it (Roseneil, 2006). In such changing contexts as ours today, friendships among women serve as a kind of redoubt in which new types of socialisation take place that facilitate the leap to the public sphere: women do new things, but with their female friends; they occupy public spaces to have fun and talk and to participate in associations, groups, networks and movements which are increasingly widespread and diverse.

Based on studies conducted in Spain, we know that friendships play a prominent role in the world of volunteer associations. Friend groups are particularly proactive in them and show a considerable ability to generate an associational network and strengthen it with their particular dynamics (Cucó, 1990, 1991, 1992; Homobono, 1994; Ramírez, 1985). The process can also work in the opposite direction, as shown in the case of *Women on the Peace Line* in Northern Ireland: there, the associational dynamic is what generates a space of friendship through which the participating women are transformed while simultaneously transforming their violent everyday environment (García, 2018).

When friendship becomes the framework of social movements, friendships can take on an unusual nature and power and even become a model of interaction and foundation for political solidarity. The case of the aforementioned radical feminists from the US is paradigmatic. Interpreting the slogan 'the personal is political' as a mandate led them along new and unsuspected pathways which involved focusing on relationships with other women and reassessing friendship until it became a normative ideal and main pattern of interaction, a model that also led to conflicts and problems (Polletta, 2002; Freeman, 1970).

We once again see similar processes to those described above in the case of *Greenham Common* and the broad movement of women for peace in Great Britain in the 1980s: a dismantling of negative stereotypes about friendship among women and a parallel reassessment of the relationship, with bonds that proved to be vital for the movement's philosophy and political praxis (Roseneil, 1995).

The developments in the Spanish feminist movement in the period 1975–2009 once again demonstrate the close connection between friendship and activism (Martínez, 2015 and 2019).

Among other things, the overlap of friendship and activism promotes a twofold phenomenon: strong bonds are created within the movement, and groups of women activists become affinity groups. This type of group, which ‘is formed from friendship, giving rise to groups that combine the emotional, the political and the fun’ (Mompó, 2019) are essential in processes pertaining to becoming an activist, keeping up individual activism and developing feminist mobilisations in general. In fact, friend networks are no longer essential in creating feminist groups, but instead participation and mobilisation actually reinforce these bonds and generate new ones.

Finally, it is worth noting that in the three feminist movements mentioned above, we find a strong link between private life and activism, and between friendship and public commitment, a feature that has also been detected in other social movements like anti-globalisation (Pleyers, 2018) and autonomous urban movements (Mompó, 2019).

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