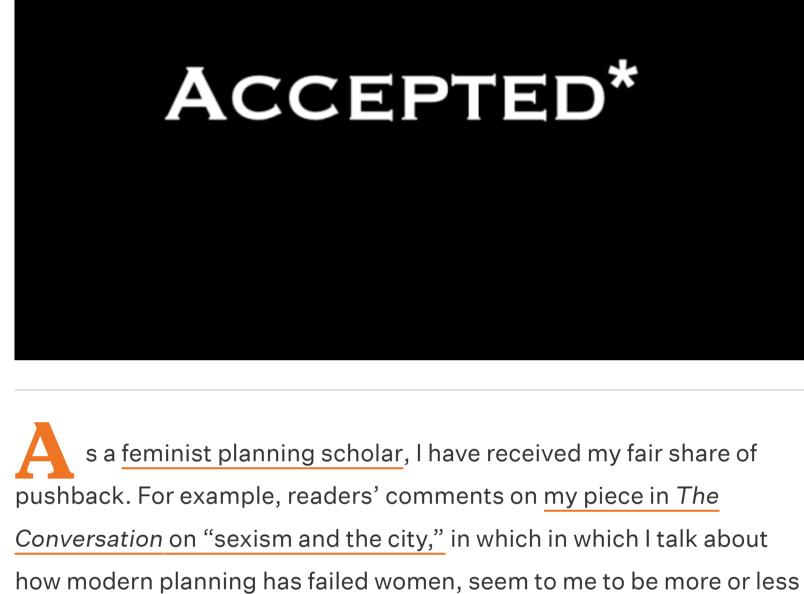
The Dark Side of Academic Sisterhood

Women faculty members hear lots of advice on coping with misogyny in academe, but the lack of support they may receive from other women is far less discussed, writes

Dorina Pojani. **By** Dorina Pojani

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Meanwhile, at work I contend with depressing statistics on gender equity at professorial levels. In Australia, the urban planning sector is notoriously "blokey" (local slang for masculine). This is evident not only in academe but also in practice. I find that older white men of Anglo descent tend to call the shots. They get more consultancy projects and research grant funding. Much has been said about some men's defensive or hostile reactions in response to feminist scholarship—or simply female presence, let alone

leadership, in the workplace. I have witnessed ad hominem attacks,

scholarly arguments over substance, in the form of peer reviews of

seeking to undermine academic women's careers—to masquerade as

split along gender lines. Some male commenters accuse me being anti-

men, while other male commenters say I'm antifeminist for arguing that

women have different needs than men when navigating urban spaces.

articles, books, grant proposals and the like. **Most Popular** Despite national pushback, WVU will cut faculty, programs WVU students, faculty cry out on last day before vote on cuts

Two years in, NIL is fueling chaos in college athletics Having led several diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives at the University of Queensland, Australia, I am well aware of the gendered discourses and norms, as well as the "benevolent patriarchy," that sustain the glass ceiling in university environments and in professional workplaces more broadly. Whole books have been written to advise female academics on how to cope with misogyny in the academy. I will contribute a viewpoint on a lesser discussed phenomenon: the lack of support that women in academe receive from other women, who are supposed to be their allies and mentors. This is far from universal, but it does happen more than it

should, given a century of feminist activism.

reasons.

Why Does This Happen?

Internalized patriarchy. In some cases, women have internalized the

patriarchy that reigns in academic circles and are compliant with its

In very male-dominated sections of academe, such as the science,

technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine fields, those few

token women who have made it through feel more pressure to "fit in with

the guys"—for example, during arduous fieldwork outdoors. That may

policies such as gender quotas in hiring, tenure and promotion, these

women hesitate. They are more concerned about not offending male

involve embodying a "tomboy" persona. When asked to support

"feminine" emotions and adopt confident or impassive behaviors, which

demands. To be taken seriously, they have learned to repress

are associated with masculinity.

without help, others can, too.

Why do women not support each other more often in higher education

in various countries around the world? I've identified at least four key

colleagues than they are about helping female colleagues. Some nonfeminist women, particularly older ones, had it tough during the early stages of their career, battling gender discrimination at every step. Having crawled their way to the top of the professoriate via a combination of ability and luck, they have become firm believers in "meritocracy." Their rationale is that if they could get where they are

Academe's cutthroat competition, fueled through an avalanche of performance scores and metrics, inevitably produces some "queen bees" who do not support—and sometimes actively undercut—female colleagues or subordinates. They try to outperform male scholars while at the same time favoring male over female peers. They may not resort to open confrontation and intimidation but use gossip and subterfuge to bully and damage the reputation of other women. Although queen bees

example, female academics without childcare responsibilities may not

understand the difficulties that working or single mothers or parents

face. I am guilty of that myself. Being child-free, I had not realized the

effort involved in combining teaching, research and service demands

Narcissism of small differences. In the case of highly ideological fields,

with child-rearing—the "second shift"—until my sister (also an

such as mine, one must also contend with the narcissism of small

differences. That leads academic women, including those who self-

academics. In fact, they support the status quo.

academic) had children.

identify as feminists, to emphasize petty disagreements or distinctions and even adopt a holier-than-thou posture. For example, in Australia, one runs into white female scholars being outraged at one another on behalf of Indigenous people, even where they don't fully understand the tenets of Indigenous culture. Personally, I have been critiqued for adopting a "homogenizing" view of feminism, because I insist this movement should speak to and for all women. A colleague, herself from the Middle East, wrote about the lived experiences of Muslim women in Anglo city spaces, only to be

underprivileged and underpaid, than to their academic sisters, who benefit from an advanced education and a secure job. On the flip side, female academics who have grown up in upper-middle-class families, encountering abundant opportunities and privileges and few obstacles in their path, may feel no need for female unity in the workplace. Attitudes, behaviors and perceptions in university spaces are racialized as well as gendered. For example, academic women from racial minorities that have been historically oppressed and exploited do not

the covert messages of female dependency and failure conveyed by their mothers since infancy. What Can We Do About It? Women's antifemale behavior within colleges and universities is not due to mere professional jealousy or innate cattiness. A host of factors are at play, which deserve to be properly researched and analyzed. I have only scratched the surface here. Going forward, the key is to recognize and value a shared goal. In the case of my own field, urban planning, this is the quest for the

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do not hesitate to use the so-called gender card when it suits them, they do not act as agents of change or as positive role models for junior Another aspect of the internalized patriarchy is a lack of awareness about the barriers that other women face in the modern university. For

reproached for stereotyping Middle Eastern migrants. Other wellmeaning colleagues have been charged with exclusivity for not explicitly mentioning nonbinary gender identities in their scholarship. The well-known feminist author Jo Freeman coined these outpourings of hostility as "trashing." Others have called out these attitudes and behaviors as performative activism. It's puzzling and frustrating to

observe supposedly progressive scholars, who claim to feel empathy for

disadvantaged and marginalized groups across the world, treat women

Intersectionality. Being a tenured or tenure-track academic implies

privileged status regardless of gender, race and class background.

a stronger allegiance to men in their social class, who are

However, some female academics from working-class families may feel

in their immediate professional circle poorly.

threaten their "mentees."

own research or teaching teams.

strong bonds within various intersections.

New Capitals (Edward Elgar, 2021).

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automatically trust colleagues from racially dominant groups. Meanwhile, an emotion such as anger from a woman of color may be seen by white colleagues or students as irrational or unprofessional. This creates another divide between female academics. Some progressive Anglo female academics go overboard to "protect" and "save" culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) colleagues. But, when strong CALD women speak their minds in areas of their scholarship, teaching and service, those same "mentors" dismiss or

The unconscious wish to fail. Some explanations might be buried in the

psyche rather than stemming from the social environment. According to

their mothers sometimes struggle to find healthy ways to relate to other

women in the workplace. They may also resent female colleagues who

are academically successful—that is, who have presumably overcome

psychologists, women who have unresolved childhood conflicts with

sustainable, just and livable city; other fields will have their own shared goals. By emphasizing common ground, female academics can foster greater understanding, collaboration and harmony—starting with their

Personally, I would not have made it this far in academe without the

genders. Gender equity in the academy cannot be achieved without

Dorina Pojani is associate professor of urban planning at the University of

Queensland, Australia, and the author of Trophy Cities: A Feminist Perspective on

support and mentorship of kind colleagues and supervisors of all

minors, but two institutions have gone beyond the bounds of the legis **Written By** Dorina Pojani

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