



COURTESY GINA GANS

# Sisterhood

WOMEN PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE FORMING SALONS, COLLECTIVES AND FACE-TO-FACE GATHERINGS TO CELEBRATE AND SUPPORT EACH OTHER'S WORK, AND SHARE IDEAS.

BY SARAH COLEMAN

“Ladies all across the world/Listen up, we're looking for recruits,” sings Brit girl-band Little Mix in their 2014 hit, “Salute.” “If you're with me, let me see your hands/Stand up and salute.” Women in the photography industry are singing a similar tune, it seems: Around the country, women's photography collectives and salons are springing up. They range in size from intimate dinner parties to groups of a hundred or

more, but all have the same core mission: to bring together women photographers for support and networking.

“I feel women are really, really under-represented in photography: commercially, editorially and in the fine-art world,” says photographer Maggie Meiners, who, together with photo editor Meg Handler and photographer Sarah Hadley, founded Chicago Women in Photography (CWIP) in January of this year. “Gather women together and we have resources, we communicate really well, and I think all of [that] creates a strong

**"If we work together, we have a better chance of success," says Jennifer McClure, who recently formed Women's Photo Alliance in New York City. "Instead of going back to the same shrinking pie, we should be thinking differently. We should be thinking, 'How do we make more pies?'"**

foundation to break down barriers."

With 116 members and counting, CWIP can certainly call its gathering a success. So can Santa Fe Women in Photography (SFWIP), which has amassed 125 members since it was founded in 2013 by Carrie McCarthy, Maggie Blanchard and Melanie McWhorter. Other, smaller groups are thriving too, like a group in Los Angeles with six members who each invite friends along, and a quarterly dinner party series for women photo professionals that New York-based photographer Manjari Sharma started a year ago.

In a way, this could be seen as counter-intuitive: At a time when the professional photography pie is shrinking, women who might be competitors are coming together

to support each other. But the women in these groups say that now, more than ever, is the time for female solidarity. "The pie is definitely getting smaller—the slices are thinner and thinner," says Lexey Swall, who coordinates meetings for Women Photojournalists of Washington (WPOW). "But I feel like now is when we should be helping each other figure out creative ways of making this life work."

The women in these groups are quick to say that they don't want to alienate men, or make sweeping generalizations about male and female styles. Many add, however, that in an industry that has traditionally been male-dominated, it's nice to have an all-female space. "Whenever I see a younger

photographer being mentored by an older photographer, they're usually men," says Sharma. "The bros have always had a club."

Certainly, sexism was in Melina Mara's mind in 2005, when she co-founded WPOW, which currently has over 200 members. In the "bastion of male power" that is the nation's capital, Mara says, sexism was rife—whether that meant "being groped by [Senator] Strom Thurmond" (a routine occurrence, she says) or being invited by male colleagues to watch a video of lesbian mudwrestling. "We were in this whole period where women photojournalists were saying, 'Hey, I'm getting bashed here. I feel very alone, very isolated, and I need to know how to cope,'" Mara recalls. "We wanted to support



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** A portrait of six members of a Los Angeles-based networking group that goes by the name Girl Gang. **ABOVE:** Image from Women Photojournalists of Washington's Fourth Annual Seminar and Portfolio Review.

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women photojournalists."

The grande dame of these groups, WPOW became a registered nonprofit in 2007, and now hosts a variety of programs including quarterly meetings with guest speakers, a mentorship program, an annual portfolio review, seminars on the business of photography, and a monthly co-ed happy hour. "It gives that feeling of having a strong base—you're not alone," says Mara, who adds that when WPOW members have been laid off from staff jobs, WPOW has been active in helping them build connections and find work.

Though times have changed, "We do feel more supported, and we've educated some of the men," says Mara, sexism still exists. Last year, a discussion about sexism in editorial photography was kicked off when Daniel Shea, a successful fine-art and editorial photographer, wrote a Tumblr post in which he wondered why relatively few women photographers get hired for editorial assignments. After reading the post, Los Angeles editorial photographer Angie Smith compared the ratio of men to women photographers in 11 magazines: Only one had even numbers, and in most, male photographers outnumbered females by at least three to one. Sexism in the editorial photography world "is definitely a reality," says Smith, who started a salon group of women photographers last year.

In New York, photographer Jennifer McClure had a similar finding in the fine-

art world. After conducting an informal survey of New York art galleries that show photography, McClure found that "of the bigger and more established galleries, women average 20 percent." A 2013 study by Chicago's Woman Made Gallery found similar results: While women make up 28 percent of artists represented by New York galleries, only 18 percent of solo shows in New York are by women. In June of this year, McClure posted on Facebook, asking women photographers in New York if they'd be interested in meeting monthly. The response was enormous. "I'm surprised; I thought maybe 20 people would be into it, but we already have 86," says McClure, who has named her group the Women's Photo Alliance. "It's fantastic, very encouraging."

The groups have an online presence: Many have closed Facebook groups, and WPOW, the biggest group, has an impressive website with online exhibitions and a blog ([www.womenphotojournalists.org](http://www.womenphotojournalists.org)). But for most members, the face-to-face

gatherings are what it's about—not only because photography can be isolating, but also because personal relationships are key to building professional connections. "There are a lot of assignments that, truthfully, we're interchangeable for," says Sharma. "In that case, it often comes down to how you connect with a person."

However, say the organizers, anyone who mounts an aggressive sales pitch at these gatherings has the wrong idea. "We would know they're going to network. Every one of these women is ambitious, hungry and creative," says Handler—but a photographer who showed up at a CWIP meeting with business cards and started handing them around was not given a warm welcome. "In terms of pimping yourself out,

this is not the venue for that," says Meiers.

Instead, the groups are providing creative ways for people to make connections and share experiences. In Santa Fe, SFWIP has hosted a museum walk-through and a hike—on which, says co-founder McCarthy, "I kept looking behind me and seeing people in really deep conversations." Sharma's dinner party group, which includes photographers and photo editors, has been doing a culinary world tour, with a risotto night, a taco night and a sushi-from-scratch night. During the food preparation, "people are discussing recent shoots and personal projects—there's no shortage of chatter," she says.

And, though many groups are relatively new, the connections are already paying off. Two of the groups have organized exhibitions: SFWIP had its first exhibition in July 2015, in local restaurant Counter Culture, and F8, a fine-art photography collective that formed as a result of the CWIP meetings, is having an exhibition in Chicago's Rangefinder Gallery in February 2016.

McClure, too, says she envisions the Women's Photo Alliance eventually having pop-up exhibitions and its own website.

"If we work together, we have a better chance of success," she says. "Instead of going back to the same shrinking pie, we should be thinking differently. We should be thinking, 'How do we make more pies?'"



COURTESY/ANGIE SMITH



TOP: SMITH; AS MANY MEMBERS OF CHICAGO WOMEN IN PHOTOGRAPHY AS COULD FIT IN TWEET LIT'S EAT RESTAURANT IN CHICAGO. ABOVE: IMAGE FROM WOMEN PHOTOJOURNALISTS OF WASHINGTON'S FOURTH ANNUAL SEMINAR AND PORTFOLIO REVIEW.