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# Trends

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**Sorority's power-players:** left to right, Lauren Hersheson, Kathryn Greig, Ahlya Fateh, Tania Hamilton, the club's founder Lisa Tse, Frances Card, Georgie Wolfenden, Ching-He Huang and Katie Derham

**T**HE dress code is Female Magnificence. The password: White Rabbit. I'm ushered into a converted church in north-west London where the floor is scattered with rose petals; handsome waiters serve champagne and canapés.

No, this isn't a new nightclub. It's the launch of the latest female networking club, The Sorority. Founder members include film director Gurinder Chadha, broadcaster Katie Derham, shoe designer Beatrix Ong and TV chef Ching-He Huang.

The brainchild of brand guru Lisa Tse, 31, Sorority has been set up as a collaborative network of inspiring professional women. While businessmen have the golf club or conference circuit, Tse argues that women work together more organically.

Membership is by invitation and for an annual fee of £1,000 you receive a handmade silver brooch bearing the group's insignia. Activities will range from the Sorority Slumber Party – an annual ball in aid of women's causes

# SISTERS ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Enough of white male dominance. London's professional women are supporting each other via female networking clubs, says **Liz Hoggard**

– to private dinners and film projects. And Tse is keen to mentor professional women of the future.

She set up Sorority because "there was nothing like it when I started my professional life." Although her design business is very successful, she knows what it's like to feel an outsider. Back in August 2008, she was chosen to represent British design on a trade mission to China to coincide with the Beijing Olympics.

"The other five chosen were successful middle-aged white males," she recalls. "I told my colleagues that if all six of us were to walk into that conference together, I would undoubtedly be mistaken for the translator..." It was a light bulb moment, and she knew many other women must feel the same. "It became my dream to create a vision that celebrates the essence of all that is best in women; a vision that champions positive female role models

where women can nurture each other while nourishing themselves."

In Britain we don't have a tradition of sororities but in the US they have been running since the 19th century, as a way to make lasting friendships and find opportunities for leadership and service.

It's a tradition Tse would like to revive. "Derived from the Latin term for 'sister', our sorors are independent and stylish women who pursue

business with passion and integrity."

No wonder London women are finding new ways to support each other. PR and marketing supremo Lynne Franks is also setting up a women's business club – The Garden – in Covent Garden in September. For the past decade, through her social network website – seednetworkingforwomen.com – she's provided a space for like-minded women to share ideas.

In partnership with Regus she is transforming a beautiful listed building on Southampton Street into an exclusively female space. There will be meeting rooms, a members' lounge, hot desks, wi-fi access and a bookshop and art gallery (promoting women artists). Annual membership, open to all women, will be around £200, and Franks hopes to roll out branches around the country.

Forget grey suits in a boardroom. The decor – overseen by Rachel Ashwell of Shabby Chic – will be glamorous and welcoming, using eco-friendly materi-

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**Sister act:** Liz Hoggard visits The Sorority

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als such as tables made from salvaged wood. "It will be a high-tech environment but the desks won't look like desks, they'll look like really lovely vintage pieces."

Women need a different environment physically, Franks argues, because of the way we network and work together. Our core skills are intuition and multitasking. We don't have to pretend to be men any more.

Confidentiality is another issue. Last year, Number 42 was set up at Palladian house, 42 Berkeley Square, for executive assistants, PAs and secretaries working at the top level of business, the

arts and politics. Here members plan events and share information and best practice in discreet surroundings.

London now has some very stylish lesbian business networking clubs such as Citypink, Samphire and Lipstick Ladies. Venues for soirées include the Sanctum Hotel, Adam Street and Soho House. Yes, there's a flirty feel, but that's more of a subtext. It's business cards being swapped, not mobile numbers.

Because the female pound matters. Former television presenter Caroline Whitney has set up events company Ms Bond to create bespoke, luxury experiences created especially for women, by women. "Let's face it, the

world of corporate events and reward schemes is usually male-focused, with meetings, conferences, business entertaining or company 'thank yous' geared towards men. Rugby or football hospitality days, golfing sessions, a day at the races, whisky-tasting sessions ... sometimes women want something that little bit personal."

Not everyone can afford an exclusive private members' club, of course. We may feel more comfortable setting up a book club, or hanging out with Shoreditch Sisters (the new edge update of the Women's Institute).

But watching the Sorority launch this week, I was struck by how quickly the event came together. Women were

exchanging career tips, address book secrets and after-school coaching for their kids, all while talking 19 to the dozen. The conversation went from politics to fashion and back again. No one was boastful or loud.

Founder member Amanda Burrell says: "I love male company. But in an organisation exclusively for women it's easier to share and nurture qualities that are, let's face it, usually considered more feminine – compassion, grace, gentleness, elegance, emotional openness and empathy, to name a few."

thesorority.org;  
seednetworkingforwomen.com;  
number-42.com  
www.msbond.co.uk