

# **WITH GOD ON THEIR SIDE: GENDER–RELIGIOSITY INTERSECTIONALITY AND WOMEN’S WORKFORCE INTEGRATION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The growing presence of pious women in the modern workforce and the unique challenges they face, given the collisions between the demands of their religious communities and those of employers (Gilliat-Ray 2010; Syed et al. 2005; Syed and Pio 2009), have rendered the need to understand gender–religiosity intersectionality in the labor market increasingly urgent. Importantly, religious groups differ in the extent to which they seek to control and discipline their members, in general, and women's behavior, in particular (Almond et al. 2003). While in some groups religiosity has been relegated to the private sphere, with little direct control exerted over members' everyday lives, other groups are heavily engaged in the regulation of members' conduct through surveillance technologies, including practices of self-regulation, mutual-surveillance and social control (Gorski 2003). In this article, we analyze the case of what we term ‘ultra-disciplinary religious groups’ (UDRGs) in an attempt to articulate the unique challenges their female members face when joining the modern workforce (Gilliat-Ray 2010; Syed et al. 2005; Syed and Pio 2009).

Despite some scholarly interest in the intersection between gender and religiosity in other social areas (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Avishai 2008; Brown 2006; Mahmood 2001), and despite the rapid theoretical development of intersectionality in organizational studies (e.g. Acker 2006; Holvino 2010; McCall 2008), the role of gender and religiosity in shaping women’s integration into the employment market

remains under-studied (but see Tariq and Syed 2018; Raz and Tzruya 2018; Essers and Benschop 2007, 2009). Adopting an institutional approach to intersectionality (Cho et al. 2013; Choo and Ferree 2010), this study asks how the intersections and power relations between the various *institutions* shape the complex societal systems of exclusion and the workforce-participation patterns of women from UDRGs and their ability to negotiate their working conditions.

This article is based on a case-study of one particular example of a UDRG, namely ultra-Orthodox (UO) Jewish women, and their experiences of integration into the Israeli high-tech industry. The study explores how the intersection between state apparatuses, employers, and an organized UO community—dubbed here “the unholy-trinity”—constructs a specific, religion-centric inequality regime (Acker 2006). Defined as a set of processes and practices that construct the rules of minority integration into the workplace, this regime determines how religiosity both restricts UO women’s career trajectories and enhances their ability to negotiate employment conditions that allow them to reconcile the conflicting demands of their UO identity and the modern professional one. This negotiation often revolves around the struggle to obtain tailor-made work–family (WF) organizational policies, which this collective requires due to the centrality of family in their religious life (e.g. Yuval-Davis 2004).

This article makes a twofold contribution. First, to the literature on gender-intersectionality at work it adds a detailed examination of how religiosity (isolated from ethnicity and immigration statuses) intersects with gender to affect women’s integration into the labor market, not only as a source of marginalization and discrimination, but also as a source of power and agency. Second, it provides new insights into the literature on organizational WF practices regarding the role of power relations in shaping marginalized groups’ ability to negotiate tailor-made employment conditions.

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: TOWARD A GENDER–  
(ULTRA)RELIGIOSITY INTERSECTIONALITY PERSPECTIVE**

**Intersectionality: Between Institutions and Identity-Construction**

Emerging originally from black feminism and the intersection of race with other axes of power and social hierarchies, intersectionality studies commonly focus on the overlapping/intersecting social identities and systems of oppression, domination or discrimination (Cho et al. 2013; Choo and Ferree 2010; Collins 2015). These aspects of identity are not unitary, mutually-exclusive entities, but are reciprocally-constructing phenomena. Studies taking this approach call for a dynamic multilevel analysis of institutions, processes, and individuals' and groups' agency as they affect each other in creating inequalities and opportunities. Thus, we find these open-ended characteristics to be highly relevant to understanding the dynamic and complex nature of the integration of women from UDRGs into the modern workplace. Institutions—such as the state and the financial markets—underlie the social structure within which practices of exclusion and inclusion are constructed, legitimized and enforced (Choo and Ferree 2010; Yuval Davis 2004). Intersectionality studies also stress the context-sensitive and dynamic processes through which the intersection of different social institutions underpins the construction of identities and their transformations over time.

Though historically centering on the intersection of *race* and gender with other power axes—such as class, sexuality, nation, disabilities and age—scholars disagree on whether intersectionality should be broadened beyond its race-centered tradition (Lewis 2013). In this article, we follow Collins' call to move beyond a “finished definition of intersectionality” (2015: 2) and to avoid “taming” this analytical approach's “unruliness” by imposing an imperial definition from above. We also follow Cho et al.

(2013: 788), who define the scope of intersectional analysis based on “what people are deploying it to do” and broaden it to include the intersection of gender and religiosity, with only marginal reference to the role of race in shaping UDRG women’s participation in work organizations (see also Essers and Benschop 2007; Romero 2017; Halrynjo and Jonker 2016).

Studies of intersectionality in organizational contexts (e.g. Acker 2006; Holvino 2010) apply this analytical approach to understand how organizational practices perpetuate inequalities in the labor market (Acker 2006). “Work organizations,” Acker argues, “are critical locations for the investigation of the continuous creation of complex inequalities because much societal inequality originates in such organizations” (p. 441). They are also the locus of many attempts to alter patterns of inequality by adopting diversity-management and anti-discrimination practices that simultaneously reproduce or even reinforce identity categories and attempt to reduce their significance in shaping social minorities’ career opportunities.

Focusing on gender–religiosity intersectionality, organizational studies have hitherto demonstrated how gender-related religious practices—such as wearing the Muslim headscarf (hijab) or imposing a gender-segregating screen (Purdah)—reinforced professional women’s marginalization and discrimination (Tariq and Syed 2018; Halrynjo and Jonker 2016). Others have examined coping strategies of Muslim women with their communities, exploring the oscillation between compliance and resistance vis-à-vis ethno-religious authority figures (Essers and Benschop 2009). While recent studies also recognize the role of state diversity-management policies in shaping the integration of women with intersecting subjugations, scholars are yet to explore the complex matrix of domination and how the relations between different institutions determine the level of marginalization that UO women experience in the workplace.

Importantly, organizational studies dealing with gender-intersectionality have commonly found that “compound oppression” or multiple marginality makes it more difficult for women to negotiate organizational adaptations to their unique needs. For instance, while family-friendly policies—such as employer-sponsored paternal leave and on-site childcare—are of help to small, middle-class, secular families, the special family obligations often experienced by employees from cultural minority groups are not catered-for. Leave to care for second- or third-degree relatives (in-laws, for instance) or lengthy bereavement leave to respect a religious community’s mourning customs are rarely included in either US or European corporations’ HR policies (Arifeen and Gatrell 2013; Bell 1990; Bell and Nkomo 2003; Bevelander and Groeneveld 2012; Dale et al. 2006; Kamenou 2008; Özbilgin et al. 2011).

In this context, scholars have called for deeper research into the role of gender-intersectionality in forming the idiosyncratic WF practices that organizations tailor specially (or avoid tailoring) for employees from marginalized and socially-stigmatized groups (Allen and Martin 2017). Given the unique requirements of women caring for the big families that characterize most UDRGs, a better understanding of the idiosyncratic WF arrangements some organizations offer to members of these groups and the conditions under which these marginalized employees are able to negotiate these arrangements are of special interest to scholars of both gender-intersectionality and organizational WF practices.

### **Gender and Religion: From Oppression to Agency**

As mentioned, religious groups vary in the extent to which individual faith requires organizational membership and adherence to religious leadership authority. Earlier studies have applied the notion of religious fundamentalism to address enclave cultures

that distinguish themselves from other groups within their own religion by highlighting their adherence to the authority of a sacred religious text or leader/prophet/God (Appleby et al. 2003; Stadler 2009). As part of their anti-liberal inclination and their hold on the past, these groups maintain a reactionary gendered division of labor and position women's role as wives and mothers at the core of their religious piety. The control of women's sexuality and the upholding of their chastity through the imposition of gender segregation and body-covering have become common practices in most such groups (Yuval-Davis 2004; Taragin-Zeller 2014). Moreover, their attitudes toward modernity in its Euro-US form, combined with their efforts to maintain community boundaries, often further complicate the integration of female members into the modern workforce (Syed et al. 2005).

Religiosity as an identity category (especially in its ultra-disciplinary form) differs from the categories of other minority groups. Due to the separation of church and state in modern liberal democracies, religiosity (unlike other identity categories such as race) is widely seen as a private choice; any conflict between one's religious identity and one's civic or economic obligations is therefore conceptualized as an individual, not a social, issue (Cromwell 1997). Thus, diversity-management practices rarely address religious requirements. Meanwhile, employees from UDRGs have generally not enjoyed the bargaining power necessary to demand special accommodation of their unique lifestyle by their employers, nor have they been able to define the lack of such organizational flexibility as a form of discrimination (Reeves et al. 2013).

One possible reason for the relative neglect of gender-religiosity intersectionality is the earlier feminist view of religion as an oppressive institution that perpetuates the gendered division of labor and the marginalization and exploitation of women (Mahmood 2001). Since women's status in ultra-disciplinary communities is often

determined by masculine authoritative systems, their active role in choosing the means to express their religiosity is largely overlooked by gender scholars (Abu-Lughod 1986; Mahmood 2001). However, as part of the transnational feminist movement, scholars are documenting and theorizing religious feminism and women's strategies for shaping their own form of religiosity, viewing it as a form of protest against the neo-liberal, individualistic culture of consumerism and its objectification of the female body (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1986; Avishai et al. 2015; Mahmood 2001). Particularly, these scholars point to the institutional context and power relations within which women from these groups negotiate and construct their identities. They argue that, through their piety (Mahmood 2001), their everyday life (Abu-Lughod 1986) and their engagement with religious texts (Taragin-Zeller 2014), these women simultaneously accept patriarchal religious authority and express their agency and potential resistance toward some aspects of this disciplinary power. In this article, we therefore juxtapose insights from studies on gender-intersectionality in and around the workplace and from the trans-feminist literature to shed light on the role of (organized) religiosity in shaping the institutional conditions and the matrix of domination within which ultra-religious women negotiate their intersecting identities and working conditions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

We took a longitudinal, inductive, qualitative case-study approach, which is well-suited to studying phenomena that involve multiple social actors and voicing their points of view (Glaser and Strauss 1999). This methodology allowed us to simultaneously examine the macro-level, institutional negotiations that led to the construction of the unique inequality regime characterizing Israeli high-tech industries' integration of UO women, and also women's individual and collective operation vis-à-vis this regime.

## **The Case-Study**

The UO community comprises 10% of Israel's population and is an enclaved community that constantly demarcates its boundaries vis-à-vis Israeli society. Women are subjected to disciplinary technologies including a strict set of behavioral rules regarding the approved dress-code, interactions with men, movement and driving restrictions, and more (Elor 2017; Taragin-Zeller 2014). These restrictions are enforced by the community's authorities through mutual surveillance and self-monitoring, but are also legitimized by the Israeli state that allows for gender-segregation in some public spaces.

Relying on state welfare, most UO men do not work, but study religion full-time, making women the main breadwinners. The combination of low incomes, a high birth rate, and the dwindling number of available jobs within the UO community has placed UO families at risk of poverty and forced women to seek jobs outside, in the secular sphere, where salaries are much higher (see Raz and Tzruya 2018). The unique requirements UO women bring into the labor market, and the prejudices they face, however, are translated into a religion-related wage-gap of 25% compared to secular women in similar positions.<sup>1</sup> Thus, despite the economic power these women gain from their employment in well-paid jobs, religious norms and disciplinary mechanisms still subject them to deeply-ingrained patriarchal authority, strict rules of chastity, and constant surveillance of their behavior and physical appearance. Furthermore, the religious normative demand for high birth rates—seen as an expression of the family's religious devotion—leads to an average of almost six children per household (Cahaner et al. 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/tt9dq7d> [Governmental report on UO women's integration, composed by N. Kasir, Ministry of Science, 2018, in Hebrew]



Given these characteristics, the modern work environment poses many hardships for UO women, not least in WF reconciliation: they must financially provide for their families while respecting the constraints of their religion (see Kulik 2016; for similar restrictions concerning Muslim women, see Erogul et al. 2016). Traditionally, these challenges have been moderated through women's part-time work and their community's support system, but now more UO women enter the secular job market, developing career aspirations that contradict the UO work ethos in which employment is secondary to family and religious devotion.

The combination of the growing need in Israel's thriving high-tech industries for relatively cheap labor and the Israeli state's interest in reducing welfare payments to large and poor UO families has led to a state-promoted, top-down channeling of UO women into high-tech employment. As we demonstrate in this case-study, the mutual interests of these institutional actors—the state, the religious community, and employers—have both contained UO women's quest for integration into the labor market and also afforded them opportunities hitherto unavailable.

### **Data-Collection and Analysis**

This study was based on five years of fieldwork in Israeli high-tech industries and their institutional environments. During this period, we conducted a total of 58 formal interviews with: line managers and HR managers (10); government decision-makers (8); and female UO high-tech employees (40). The semi-structured interviews lasted about one hour and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms. We also attended four conferences on this subject and used UO press items and state policy documents to corroborate our findings.

We analyzed the interview data to (a) map the institutional conditions within which UO women negotiate their employment conditions and (b) trace women's interpretation

of their world and the possibilities opened to them to shape their everyday work and home lives. Interviews with other actors were analyzed to understand the nature of the respective organizational and state policies and how they were implemented. Collecting data from both interviews and observations allowed us to contextualize organizational WF practices and build a grounded theory that emerged from the field (Charmaz 2014). We endeavored to avoid judgmental readings and remain loyal to the interviewees' interpretations by corroborating and comparing our separate insights with those of our research assistants as well as with some of the interviewees.

### **THE INSTITUTIONAL SPHERE: THE UNHOLY TRINITY OF STATE, EMPLOYERS, AND THE ULTRA-ORTHODOX COMMUNITY**

Our first set of findings relates to how religiosity, power relations, and intersecting ideologies at the institutional level have constructed an inequality regime within which UO women negotiate their intersecting identities and working conditions. At the core of this institutional intersectionality is the triangular relationship between a) the centralist, neo-liberal Israeli state and its welfare policy, b) the high-tech industry and its standard employment practices, and c) the organized UO community, which enjoys political power at the state level due to the coalitional structure of the Israeli government that depends on UO parties. Thanks to this political leverage, the UO community to which these women belong can influence how (and if) its members are integrated into the labor market.

Our analysis of Israeli state policy documents and interviews with officials suggests that, following the principle of “capitalist patriarchy” (Mies 2014), the state’s primary objective in promoting women’s integration into the high-tech industry was to reduce welfare allowances. As Mies has demonstrated in other contexts, here too,

liberal ideas of women's empowerment have been "hijacked" to produce a cheaper workforce. Neither gender equality nor the empowerment of women from marginalized groups has been considered an important policy goal in its own right. This was evident in our interviews with policymakers, who exposed the "behind the scenes" thinking that had led to this policy. Sharon, a senior officer at the Ministry of Economy and Industry, commented:

We realized that, to get above the poverty line, these big families need 200% jobs [two full-time jobs]. But we also know that the rabbis don't want men to leave the Kollel [advanced Judaic studies program], and these women cannot really work full-time like secular women. They can maybe work for 6.5 hours per day. But we realized it would be better if they worked these hours in high-tech, where the salary is higher than in education, where they cannot even make a minimal wage. It's a start... so we encouraged their seminars [UO women-only trade schools] to offer courses in software development and quality control, and we encouraged employers to employ them under their own conditions, although they cannot expect to earn as much as regular workers do.

Avishai, another senior officer in this ministry, added:

When Israel joined the OECD, our employment numbers looked bad compared to other countries, and our welfare payments were high. We identified the ultra-Orthodox populations as our weakest links. I was trying to come up with a policy that would encourage employers to hire them despite all the adjustments required, and the fact that they cannot meet the standard working hours in the

industry.... We decided to compensate the employers who agree to hire and integrate them.... We assumed that, after three years of subsidized work, the employers will not want to lose the workers they have already trained, and that the women will catch up and work like regular workers.

Although state officials regard the integration of UO women into the general labor market as a significant economic need, they regard the political power relations that structure the integration process and the religious requirements and rabbis' interests as non-negotiable. Thus, the state policy has been implemented via two main strategies: increasing technology-related training in seminars for UO women, and subsidizing their employment by providing employers with financial incentives as long as they employ a *group* of (at least 5) UO women for at least three years. No conditions have been imposed regarding wage, promotion, or working conditions.

The availability of newly-trained high-tech candidates and a blend of governmental pressure and encouragement have led Israeli employers seeking cheap local labor to hire graduates from UO women-only trade schools. However, the women's lack of an academic degree, coupled with the need to employ them as a group and offer tailor-made workplace conditions, have led to the creation of segregated in-house workspaces or outsourced employment arrangements. The religious requirements were unquestioned by organizational managers, and many of them pointed to the combination of a national mission and business needs in their decision to employ UO women, despite the social and economic cost of hiring employees who require special treatment. Yoram, a senior manager in a large multinational corporation, reflected:

We needed workers for simple tasks, and we prefer to have them here and not somewhere in India to avoid the costs of remote work and time differences. The headquarters had a diversity-management policy, but religiosity doesn't count as "diversity". Gender does. Still, without a university degree, they couldn't become full-time regular workers, so we hired some of them as "students" and forced them to take some courses in the Open University. We also started working with a UO subcontractor who employs them in a separate part of our building and takes care of all the "special needs." It is a win-win for everybody. We have the workers we need, and some of them are very good and eager to learn. They make more money than the regular [low-tech] UO workers... The adjustment wasn't easy... I had to publish a document of "do's" and "don'ts" when collaborating with these women.

Dan, another employer commented:

It's a national mission for us to help this community get above the poverty line. This community is growing and in twenty years the country's economy won't be able to support such a large group who lives on welfare. But we also needed workers. We had a good experience with them, so we decided to bring them here and employ them directly, like regular workers. We train them here like we train everyone else. We knew we would have to make adjustments to have them and... work with the rabbis.

All the managers accepted the demand to accommodate the special needs of the UO workers, including shorter hours, no overtime, and no telecommuting. They also

accepted the need to work with community representatives to make the workplace acceptable from a religious standpoint. Three of the firms hired a UO representative, who ensured that religious requirements were being fulfilled by the employer and that women met the organization's professional expectations to secure future jobs for other community members. Without such collaboration and community approval, UO women would not be able to join a firm *and* maintain their status in the community.

As gender equality is not part of the UO community's worldview, its interest in legitimizing female employment includes securing a gender-segregated environment for women, with minimal (and well-supervised) encounters with men; maintaining close supervision of women's chasteness and behavior at work; monitoring women's Internet access to minimize exposure to "inappropriate" content; and preventing the transformation of the gendered hierarchy in the community, despite women's role as successful breadwinners. This was evident in an interview with an important rabbi, Yehouda Lipkovitz, in a UO newspaper: "... make sure that salaries are not too high, for two main reasons: 1. So that the standard of living does not become too high; 2. So that the husband will maintain his authority as the final word at home." Only two of the 40 women we interviewed blamed the rabbis for deliberately keeping women's wages low to prevent them from "raising their heads" and demanding a change in their status at home and in the community.

As we mentioned earlier, in Israel's coalition parliamentary structure, UO parties have a major influence on many political decisions in comparison to their size, especially those related to their own members. Hence, the UO community's ability to impose its worldview on the state and employers is significant. It is within this context that the intersection of these three institutional powers, the "unholy trinity," has led to the development of an inequality regime (Acker 2006) characterized by (1) the entrance

of UO women into the workplace as a group rather than as individuals; (2) a dual-authority structure whereby UO women are subjugated to the simultaneous demands of managers and community representatives within the workplace; and (3) a strong preference for facilitating integration over equal employment, legitimizing a tradeoff in which employers accommodate religious requirements in exchange for cheap labor.

As we demonstrate next, these contours set out the conditions within which UO women operate in their workplaces.

### **INTERSECTING PROFESSIONAL, GENDER, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES THROUGH TAILOR-MADE WORK–FAMILY POLICIES**

For UO women, entering the secular high-tech industry constitutes a potential identity crisis. While most UO rabbis have reluctantly given their blessing to female employment in gender-segregated workspaces and to technological studies in women-only seminars, for many such women, everyday interaction with the secular world contradicts the socialization that is designed to prepare them for their supporting role as wives and mothers. Unlike employment within their enclaved community (usually as teachers), which does not require them to divert from the community's expectations, high-tech employers usually demand longer working hours. For UO women this means being away from their community, constant interaction with outsiders, and exposure to unsupervised content and knowledge. Our interviews with UO women suggest that their struggle to secure idiosyncratic employment practices fitting their religious needs and separating them from other workers, physically or otherwise, allows them to construct, reconstruct, and legitimize an intersected professional and religious identity. A central aspect of this identity is their refusal to prioritize work, professional identity, and a high salary over their family and community obligations. Combined with adherence to

kosher dietary and strict religious dress codes, the agreement to pay an economic “religiosity penalty” in the form of lower pay and reduced career prospects was presented in interviews as their identity marker. Racheli, a mother of three and former team leader in a small technology firm, revealed:

For me, my kids, my husband and my extended family come first. I’m not like secular mothers who are willing to see their kids only after they’re asleep. Being a ultra-Orthodox woman means that my home comes first. I need to be there at 3:00 p.m. to pick them up from their kindergartens. I need to be a good wife and keep the house together... I only work to support my family. I like my work, but if my boss cannot offer arrangements that fit my family needs, I’m gone.

While secular Israeli high-tech women often show similar devotion to their childcare obligations, they rarely show a similar commitment to housework and extended family commitments (Frenkel 2008). Moreover, much like their counterparts in the US and most of Europe, secular high-tech women draw on their family support system and organizational WF practices to uphold their commitment to their job, *despite* their family obligations, finding ways to work longer hours or telecommute to meet their employers’ expectations. In contrast, Racheli draws a clear line between UO and secular employees, stating that she is unwilling to compromise her familial obligations because such compromise goes against her *religious piety*. Her decision to place family over career is presented as her own choice and an expression of her agency, although she does mention rabbis’ instructions in this area.



Judith, also a mother of three, declared a similar devotion to her family and reluctance to work overtime, saying that “it’s not the way it’s done in our community.” However, she agrees to work extra hours every once in a while to secure her position and ensure her employer will keep hiring UO employees:

My boss knows that I don’t do overtime... But he also knows that, in an emergency, if it’s not Saturday or a holy day [when UO Jews do not work], he can trust me to show up and do my part. If this became a regular thing, I would have to quit. I left my previous employers because the demands for overtime were constant. But I’m a good worker. I want him to know that he can trust me, and he does.

Despite the common link between UO women’s religious identity and familial devotion, Judith’s words also exemplify the flexibility they have in interpreting the community’s norms and religious commandments. While Racheli is adamant she will not work any overtime, Judith is more flexible. Yet, despite their divergence from the standard high-tech overtime norms, both women see themselves as highly valuable employees.

The key to reconciling these ostensibly competing identities (as UO women and devoted employees) lies in the provision of unique organizational WF arrangements. At the micro level, these include an acceptance of the women’s refusal to work overtime or flexible hours, to telecommute, or to travel abroad; and, at the macro level, they include the provision of job-sharing options that allow for frequent maternity leave. UO women presented all these requirements as dictated by their religiosity, as a way to

ensure employers' (reluctant) collaboration with their non-mainstream demands. We now detail these micro- and macro-demands.

### **Micro-level Work–Family Practices**

The most conspicuous concession made by employers is that UO women may refuse to work from home. Due to the potential for exposing believers (especially children) to the outside world, rabbis are reluctant to approve Internet connections at home. Not having such a connection is seen as a sign of uncompromised religious devotion; hence, when an Internet connection *is* allowed, it is expected to travel through kosher filters approved by rabbis. By openly agreeing to work from home, women practically confess to their UO peers that they have a home Internet connection and therefore potentially expose their children to secular work practices.

For instance, Simah, 22 and a mother of two, observed: “Most of the girls here don’t have Internet at home. When they finish work here, they finish working, and they don’t take work home.” Orly, a senior manager who used to work from home when her employer paid for the Internet connection, revealed her ambivalence concerning this practice:

In the past, I'd work from home three to four times a week... I wasn't sure if I should use Internet at home, but because [corporation 1] subsidized it, I did it. Now that they stopped it, I'm not sure that I want to bring it home... now I make sure not to [take] work [home] that requires Internet access.

In a similar vein, most interviewees stated that they refuse to work long hours or travel abroad for professional assignments due to their devotion to their religiosity and to their families. This is evident in the words of Tahel, a young high-tech employee:

They [employers] understand that these are ultra-Orthodox women... our goal is to support a [religious] household... I don't need extra hours, don't need to be flown abroad like I'm someone important... To all of you [secular people], the ideal is a career, and to us, [the ideal] is a house of Torah that you need money [to maintain].

Simah, too, insisted that her employers accept that UO women cannot work overtime or during the holidays, and must leave work punctually (allowing them to start early so they can leave early):

I even leave at 3:10. So, it has its advantages: they [employers] know there's no one to talk to [on holidays], and mothers leave at three, [which is] totally not typical of high-tech... and at home, I won't get phone calls, I don't need a computer... they don't force us.

Sara, who works in a mixed-gender environment, verbalized a strong religion-based objection to being sent abroad:

If they needed to send me abroad, I wouldn't go. It's problematic. If I had to, then I'd need to travel with my husband, but only if there's no children. I

wouldn't do that to my son; I wouldn't leave him. Going abroad is really complicated. There's a hotel and meals and a big clash of values.

Irit, a mother of eight, refused a promotion because it required working overtime. The decision was straightforward, a result of the conflict the promotion would have caused with her family needs and religious restrictions:

Any promotion will expose me to things that I'm not interested in... work would take up more room in my life at the expense of my family. [Promotion means] being busy, working [long] hours, [having constant] availability, because [after] any promotion, you have to give more, you have to justify why you're getting a higher paycheck. I do my own negotiating. I feel good with where I'm at; I'm being advanced nicely at my own [pace] to work as a programmer.

The role of the UO community in enforcing women's avoidance of working overtime is reflected in Sarah's words:

My mother would say every time that I come home late to the kids, that [this is] why she regrets sending me to a high-tech [industry]. In the end, I still manage with laundry, the home, and all that, but practically, the person who is with the kids in the end is [my] husband. My mother is angry at that; she's scared that people [will] talk about us because family is above all else...

Certainly, while some of our interviewees presented telecommuting, long working hours, and travelling as being completely at odds with their religious imperatives, and therefore inadmissible, others insisted that such practices are allowed by their religion under certain circumstances. This inconsistency can be explained by the fact that the various women obey different rabbis, or by the different norms applied to single vs. married or younger vs. older women. It was also obvious that most women felt that “playing the religiosity imperative card” made their position stronger vis-à-vis their employers’ demands.

### **Macro-Level Idiosyncratic Practices**

Since UO families are characterized by high birth rates, many of our older participants had between five and eight children, and the younger ones were expected to give birth every one or two years. In Israel, maternity leave is mandatory, state-sponsored, and fully paid for 15 weeks, with further elective unpaid leave of up to 60 days. As employers legally cannot refuse maternity leave, they often regard the obligation to allow their workers to take frequent leave as an extra burden associated with the employment of UO women. Still, our interviewees did not report any pushback from their employers on this point. A vice-president of a large high-tech firm who employs UO female programmers, said:

I know they give birth every year, but they’re good and loyal workers, so I hire 130% of the workforce I need, knowing that about a third are always on maternity leave. They also know that they’ll need [to take] maternity leave soon, so between [periods of leave] they are extremely devoted, never staying at home with a sick child or being sick themselves.

Overall, our interviewees insisted that the special WF arrangements they were able to negotiate mark their distinct identity as devoted UO employees, allowing them to display their professionalism as well as their diligence. While recognizing the extra burden associated with the special arrangements required to employ these women, eight of the ten managers we interviewed showed sympathy to their hardship. They did not question women's claims that their working arrangements are dictated by religious commandments and that they have little choice in their working practices. With few exceptions, they view UO women as diligent employees, despite the religious restrictions imposed on them. UO women who diverged from the norm and agreed to work longer hours, travel abroad, or work from home were often regarded as *exceptionally committed* workers and were offered higher wages and accelerated promotions, even though they still worked fewer hours than other employees and were subject to many restrictions. Two examples of this special treatment can be found in the words of two managers of large Israeli subsidiaries. Eli, a project manager who supervised a large group of UO women, said:

They're good and devoted workers. Many of them started here as part of the outsourcing project. They worked for the ultra-Orthodox subcontractor, in a gender-segregated environment, and never stayed late. But when we identify a devoted worker, one who, despite everything, is willing to stay later [during an] emergency and is a good [and] quick learner, we always try to get her... to work directly with us. Even if she works fewer hours, we'd promote her and pay her more.

Udi, another project manager who initiated the recruitment of UO women in his firm and was largely disappointed with the results, was nevertheless enthusiastic about one of the UO employees who, despite her restrictions, stood out:

Many of them don't make extra effort, but some are really promising. One of them, Batia, is really exceptional. She comes from one of the most extreme sects. She has lots of kids, and we had to offer her special arrangements. She works part-time; we even allowed her to work from an employment center near her house so that she wouldn't have to spend time on public transportation. But she is exceptional.

Studies on intersectionality often refer to the political marginalization of social minorities as an explanation for the dual marginalization of women in the labor market (Holvino 2010). While UO women in the Israeli high-tech sector do experience a significant pay gap compared to secular women and men, our data suggest that they still elicit employers' consideration of their special circumstances and requirements and maintain their jobs in cases in which secular women would likely lose theirs. As we show next, this unique situation is related to the two closely-intertwined aspects of UO religiosity: tight internal community organization and uncompromising piety.

### **TRAPPED IN THE MATRIX: INSTITUTIONAL INTERSECTIONALITY AND THE QUEST FOR TAILOR-MADE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS**

While the particular features of the UO women's inequality regime—as part of the negotiation between the state, employers, and the religious community—contribute to their success in achieving uniquely flexible working arrangements, this is *only* relative

to the wider marginalization and discrimination to which they are subject. Employers accept women's demands because of the low pay–high concessions tradeoff. In other words, as all parties in “the unholy trinity” forsake the importance of women's equal earning capacity, employers are more likely to offer tailor-made employment arrangements in exchange for cheap labor.

Although UO women earn less than secular women (Cahaner et al. 2017), especially in segregated workplaces, many of the UO women we interviewed accept the sacrifice they have to make to adhere to the normative family role their communities assign them, despite a sense of unfairness. Orit, who works in a gender-segregated environment that offers special arrangements for UO women, challenges the price tag employers put on providing “bespoke” conditions:

I really respect people who are willing to give up money to keep themselves safe [from the threat of secular influences]. I think it's the right thing in life. But I don't think that it should be done in a devious way that [suggests that] all the ultra-Orthodox people are worth less... so you could say that “ultra-Orthodox women have better conditions... and instead of giving them 10,000 NIS we'll give them 8,000 NIS.”

While she protests against the lower salaries UO women must accept to secure tailor-made arrangements, Orit still acknowledges that agreeing to these conditions is an expression of religious devotion. The low pay–high concessions tradeoff is therefore understood as a strategy among UO women to uphold their identity at work while carving out a path for themselves that will allow their integration into the secular workforce without losing their UO feminine identity.



Employers and state officials have also justified this tradeoff, citing the high cost of these concessions and the low productivity associated with the special arrangements as justification for offering lower recompense. Yet, while constituting a strong incentive for the accommodation of UO women's special needs, the tradeoff alone cannot explain the wide prevalence of these arrangements and employers' general view of UO women as desirable employees, despite the many restrictions and liabilities associated with their employment.

A complementary explanation offered by our interviewees concerns the level of women's self-organization and the close involvement of community representatives in the workplace. Ruth, a 27-year-old employee, refers to the rabbi's role both in assisting UO women's integration and supervising them:

[The on-site rabbi's] job is to help us integrate and to run the employee training [sessions] for the secular workers and for us. The second purpose is they make sure that the Internet is blocked of content that is not allowed... mainly to check that [UO] girls don't waste time on the Internet, that they are not exposed to problematic content, and they don't needlessly chat with men.

As evident in many interviews, the UO community has gained the right to permanently place its (highly-paid) rabbis in some workplaces or to intervene in labor negotiations, in exchange for the supply of cheap, skilled, loyal, and obedient workers. Constituting an additional authority within the workplace, the on-site rabbi organizes the women and plays the role of a union representative who can cause labor unrest if his demands are not met. Given the balance of power between the employers and the

community, special arrangements can be seen as the outcome of a collective bargaining process that is exceptional in today's high-tech industry in Israel.

In some firms, husbands' presence in the workplace has become another corporate practice aimed at upholding *Issur Yichud*, the Jewish law forbidding men and women to mix behind closed doors unless they can be seen from the outside or easily interrupted. From an organizational perspective, this restriction is especially problematic in sterile assembly rooms and in zones to which entry is forbidden for security reasons. To allow UO women to work in such spaces with men, some employers provide the husbands with keycards, allowing them to forgo screening processes. According to Sarah, the presence of her colleague's husband in the workplace has helped them negotiate their religious requirements: "One of the husbands came and spoke with the manager, and they agreed on some things, so now the place is really suitable for ultra-Orthodox women."

The fact that UO women enter the workplace as a collective and are backed up by the community enables their lifestyle to be upheld, justifying their workplace demands with religious commandments and community supervision, and presenting a united front vis-à-vis management.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on a rich dataset from the case-study of UO women in the Israeli high-tech sector, this article has addressed the question of how gender-religiosity intersectionality and the matrix of power relations and collaborations between the state, employers and the UDRGs' authorities have shaped both the unequal and idiosyncratic integration of UO women into the labor market and also their bargaining power at work. We have shown how religiosity, both in its organizational-institutional sense and in its identity-related

sense, shapes the inequality regime within which women from a religious minority negotiate their intersecting identities and work benefits.

Specifically, we have shown that the patriarchal collaboration of the unholy trinity has forced UO women into a state of otherhood and marginalization when entering the high-tech workforce. All three institutions have had a vested interest in maintaining the structural boundaries within which these women work and the extent to which they can negotiate better wages. However, it is against these boundaries that UO women are also able to build their collective action and are imbuing their intersecting identity with new meaning.

While recent studies on gender–religiosity intersectionality (e.g. Romero 2017) have begun looking into the role of religion and its intersection with race in shaping gender inequality, our case-study allows us to deepen the understanding of the intersection of gender and religion (in its ultra-disciplinary and highly organized form) and its role in determining UO women's everyday experiences in the workplace. Contrary to other marginalized groups, whose lack of social resources makes it difficult for them to self-organize and collectively bargain, membership in UDRGs offers a pre-existing organizational and political infrastructure that helps these doubly-marginalized women in their struggle to secure idiosyncratic working conditions. The combination of a ready-made authority structure and a strong ideological system with the potential to challenge employers' demands—when these demands counter the UO community's interest—has provided UO women with a union-like collective resource that other marginal groups rarely enjoy. In this sense, the tripartite relations between the UO community, the state and employers echo the classic tripartite corporatism that has played a critical role in securing better working conditions for unionized labor in some nations. The powerful protection and sense of belonging secured through community

membership may also explain these women's loyalty to their communities, even when this loyalty "costs" them their ability to earn a better income and to enjoy what secular society often conceives as more individual freedom.

Importantly, our study allows us to isolate the positioning of UDRGs in the institutional matrix from other power axes. While the focus of previous studies has been on Muslim women—who are often first- or second-generation migrants from the Global South, whose status reflects the intersection of religiosity with ethno-racial-national power axes—our case-study identifies those unique aspects of gender-religiosity intersectionality that simultaneously determine the pros and cons for pious women's integration into the general labor market. While their adherence to the UO community's modesty codes, working-hours rules and other behavioral regulations makes them a target for discrimination and prejudice and renders it more difficult for them to present themselves as ideal high-tech workers, it is also a source of power and agency. Since their deviation from the ideal-worker model is seen to reflect their community's rules rather than their devotion to the workplace, and since they are hired in groups rather than as isolated individuals, their piety is rarely challenged by employers, even when it collides with organizational norms.

In that sense, we also add to earlier studies of piety as a form of agency (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2001; Mahmood 2001). These authors and other feminist scholars have pointed to women's adoption of varied and individually-selected religious customs—such as wearing the burka or devoting themselves to Koranic studies as a means to secure agency in a world where freedom is otherwise minimized. By contrast, our case suggests that, in the modern and ostensibly liberal workforce, and with the backing provided by a well-organized and politically-powerful community, religiosity may allow for a certain level of bargaining with capitalist patriarchy and the labor market's

disciplinary mechanisms. By choosing and negotiating their own ways of adhering to their community's demands, the UO high-tech workers in our study were able to maintain their position in the communities, secure their backing, and gain an additional source of power therein, which is grounded in their relative financial independence.

Finally, the insights gained by applying the analytical framework provided by intersectionality studies to our case allow us to contribute to a better understanding of the role of intersecting power relations in shaping the reconciliation of work and family in the modern workplace. Following Collins' (1998) understanding of the role of racial and class differences in family practices in the U.S. in the reproduction of intersecting gender inequalities, studies of WF reconciliation have called for a wider recognition of the different reconciliation policies required by families from underprivileged racial, class and religious groups. While these studies highlight the difficulty faced by these groups in bargaining toward idiosyncratic employment conditions, our study calls attention to the significance of the whole matrix of domination as it determines the potential agentic resources available to marginalized groups.

Other studies looking at the role of power in shaping WF organizational policies have shown that power resources associated with women's professional skills and unionization have played a significant role in pushing employers to provide such policies. Our study enhances the understanding of the role of power relations in determining the adjustment of employer-provided WF policies to the idiosyncratic needs of marginalized groups. While studies commonly document the difficulties experienced by Israeli mothers in the high-tech sector in reconciling employers' demands with family norms (e.g. Frenkel 2008), we found that collective bargaining afforded to the UO female workers through their community membership has given them a degree of bargaining power that their secular colleagues still lack.

While recognizing the idiosyncrasy of the Israeli UO case, due to the unique aspects of the Jewish religion and the UO community's political standing, our article highlights the importance of studying the institutional and ideological aspects of religiosity as determinants of gender–religiosity intersectionality and their labor market consequences. More comparative studies are needed to develop our understanding of how different relationships of power between states, religious sects, and employers shape the integration of religious women into the workforce and the extent of the marginalization and discrimination they face.

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