

Gender Negotiations

Editorial

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A nationwide poll released at the end of October sponsored by Time magazine and the Rockefeller Foundation probed what men and women think of their changing roles in society and attitudes toward each other as spouses, parents, bosses and co-workers, in light of the fact that women now comprise half of all workers, for the first time in American history. The headline: The battle of the sexes gives way to negotiations.

Decades into the women's movement, it seems that men and women agree on many work and family issues, and characterize gender dynamics at home and in the office not with the old, strident language of war — battles, strategy, power, weaponry — but rather in a newer context of negotiation. We've gone from manning the barricades to humming the refrain from a classic Beatles song, "we can work it out."

Like all breathless results of social trends, these, too, must be greeted with appropriate skepticism. But they ring true, with a powerful message that the Jewish community in America needs to hear.

It's past time to actively negotiate a more substantive role for women in Jewish communal life.

Had the Forward's survey of women leaders in major communal organizations been conducted just two years ago, the results would have been even more dismal. Clearly some of the bastions of power once monopolized by men — particularly in federation and religious life — are beginning to open up to women, who often bring with them new perspectives, energy and leadership styles. Many more women are chairing important, policy-making nonprofit boards. Foundations are beginning to invest in educating and mentoring young women and men. Rabbinical schools are ordaining record numbers of women, who already are having a profound effect on Jewish ritual and spiritual practices.

Sybil Sanchez, the first woman to lead the Jewish Labor Committee, credits the Muehlstein Institute for Jewish Professional Leadership for preparing her for her new role and strengthening her Jewish commitment. Other women can point to similarly productive training and mentoring experiences.

Still, the numbers speak for themselves. With women holding only 14.3% of the top jobs in the 75 organizations surveyed by the Forward, and with salaries for women lagging far behind those for men, the community clearly has work to do.

The first task is to dispel the myths. It's surprising how many of the people interviewed by the Forward implied that women are discounted for major roles because they may not be successful fundraisers. Really? Half of the eight presidents of Ivy League institutions are women; isn't raising money a key job requirement? The speaker of the House of Representatives is a woman, and she was described recently in New York magazine as "the best fundraiser that the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee has ever had."

Respectfully, when it comes to fundraising, not all the men in charge have done such a stellar job lately. The Chronicle of Philanthropy recently reported that giving to the largest 400 charities nationwide increased by 1% in 2008 over the previous year. But the 12 largest Jewish community federations saw their donations plummet by 16% during the same period. At the same time, donations to Hadassah dropped by nearly half — but then, the venerable women's organization hasn't had a woman leader since its previous CEO left halfway through last year.

The second myth to be dispelled is that women don't want these leadership roles because of the personal sacrifices that often accompany them. Really? Jennifer Gorovitz, the new acting head of San Francisco's Jewish federation, has young children. Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, the first woman to lead the Rabbinical Assembly, has young children. The smartest, fairest thing to do to see if a qualified woman wants a big leadership role is to ask her.

But even more broadly, the issue here is not whether women can do these demanding jobs — surely, they can — but whether the jobs themselves are shaped to meet contemporary reality.

Here the Time/Rockefeller poll is instructive: "Rather than pining for family structures of an earlier generation, the poll found that men and women agree that government and businesses have failed to adapt to the needs of modern families." Note that this is a sentiment shared by men *and* women, who crave more flexible work schedules, increased support for families, and a workplace that

reflects this new reality — a reality in which the traditional formulation of male breadwinner and female homemaker is as dated as a vinyl record.

Finally, the unconscionable salary gap must be examined. The argument that women earn less because they run smaller organizations is a self-fulfilling prophecy if they are barred by custom or prejudice from competing for the high-paying jobs in the federation and national advocacy world.

Moreover, women seem to lag behind even in the same jobs. A just-published study by Bruce Phillips, professor of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, found “a significant difference exists between the income earned by men and women working in Jewish communal service.” But, he said, that is *not* because women are working in lower-paying settings, and it is *not* because men are more experienced in their jobs.

It is essential to address these employment and salary gaps not just because of the individual unfairness, but also because of a communal imperative. The old, stereotypical constructs have to be left behind — women aren't by their nature better leaders and managers. Neither, though, are men.

We don't advocate for simplistic quotas or the elevation of anyone just because of gender. What the Jewish community needs and deserves is a diverse set of leaders poised to confront the immense challenges of an equally diverse people. All those who work in Jewish communal life, and the even larger number who contribute their time and money, must hold leadership accountable. The future of our people depends on it.