

## The woman of their dreams

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Barbara Sofer , THE JERUSALEM POST

### **Leveling the Playing Field**

By Shifra Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar, Marty Linsky

Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community and Cambridge Leadership Associates

128 pages; \$15

Women hold most senior management positions in Jewish organizational life, but they are nearly absent from the most influential, prestigious and best-compensated jobs in the system. Considering the espoused liberal consciousness of most Jewish organizations - no, this is not a study of the Orthodox world - the continuing gender gap within Jewish organizations and communal life is disappointing indeed.

Inequity isn't just bad news for the careers of individual women who are frustrated and discouraged. The lack of meritocracy holds back Jewish organizational life, claim Shifra Bronznick, Didi Goldenhar and Marty Linsky, authors of *Leveling the Playing Field: Advancing Women in Jewish Organizational Life*. They bring impressive studies to prove that gender equity is not only a core value in itself but that it is vital to the health of Jewish organizations and will improve their effectiveness.

Despite decades of consciousness-raising, gender gaps still exist in almost all lines of work. Talented women musicians lose out to males competing for the same orchestra chairs unless screens are used during auditions. In corporate interviews, women are ranked by past achievements and men given credit for imagined future potential. The identical scientific achievement is viewed as less impressive if the evaluators know the scientist is a woman.

In 1999, the percentage of senior women at MIT had been static at 8 percent for decades. Nonetheless, the administration couldn't believe gender bias was a contributing factor in such a scientific setting. But when the brainy women professors who were at MIT gathered the data from hiring practices and awards of lab and office space, they proved beyond a scientific doubt that gender factors were involved in promotions and allocations. In response, MIT launched a major initiative to address gender issues and soon had its first woman president.

Such an initiative is critical in the Jewish communal world, where women lag far behind the curve for academia, philanthropy and the secular non-profit sector, argue Bronznick, Goldenhar and Linsky. They point out that the very family atmosphere and the blending of personal and professional life that often permeate Jewish organizational life ironically make it hard for "good daughters" to demand positions of power in a mission-driven organization. At the same time, Jewish organizations rarely provide family-like flexibility that would make it easier for women with multigenerational family responsibilities to grapple with career demands.

Why don't talented women organically rise to the very top? The authors debunk three central myths about women employed in the Jewish communal world. The first is the perception based on the large number of young, talented women who enter the communal field, that Jewish organizations are great training grounds for young, talented women. In reality, women with great potential quickly realize that they won't get far within the Jewish world, evaluate their options and move on to other fields where they can further their career aspirations. They're replaced by other young women, soon to be disillusioned, creating a revolving door instead of a culture in which women move up a ladder, gaining experience and taking on responsibility.

The second myth is that with a little patience, women will naturally make their way to the top. Women need more than patience - they need to mobilize their resources, make alliances and change the patterns of the organizations in which

they're working. Today, many leaders fear that the feminization of the Jewish communal field will lead to a decline in its prestige and effectiveness and erect barriers to halt the progress of high-potential women.

Lastly, there's the myth that high-level Jewish communal jobs that include major fund-raising require 24/7 or at least 24/6 commitment, therefore eliminating family-concerned Jewish women from the competition.

"Outside the Jewish world, women now lead 23 percent of universities in the United States in positions that demand extraordinary fund-raising talent," say the authors. "The fact that women can succeed in presidential posts, including four in the Ivy League, should make it abundantly clear: women can be highly effective fund-raisers for large nonprofit institutions."

With alacrity, this slim paperback addresses women's justifiable gripes and provides practical suggestions to level the playing field. There's even a workbook section that provides tools for immediate gender assessment and exercises.

Bronznick, Goldenhar and Linsky underline qualities and behaviors that are necessary for adaptive change. These include stepping back and taking a distanced view, thinking politically and - here's a tough one for most women - orchestrating conflict around this issue and taking the heat from the backlash.

In addition to providing a guideline for change, *Leveling the Playing Field* offers interesting first-person illustrations of real women who have taken the initiative and made it to the top. For example, Maxine Epstein, the Marion region director of the Jewish Community Federation, recalls her annoyance at reading the cover story in the *Northern California Jewish Bulletin* decrying the lack of qualified Jewish community professionals to fill the shoes of the CEO positions in California. After reading the article, she took out a pair of nice blue pumps from her closet, wrapped one of them in a copy of the article along with her resume and her vision of the future and sent it off. She won the executive job.

*Leveling the Playing Field* urges relentless attention to matters of inequity - at the risk of being typecast as a bluestocking. One strategy that has been successful in correcting these inequities embraces the insistence that women be included according to a neutral, numerical formula at all decision-making tables and public venues. Make the numbers work for you. The tipping point for ensuring minority presence and voice has been found to be 35 percent. Company policy should ensure that negotiations, planning and salary committees have this minimum number of women.

Critical to attracting dedicated parents of both genders, but particularly women, is providing greater workplace flexibility. The same demographers who contribute to the most compelling studies of the Jewish workplace have also studied the crisis in Jewish demographics, particularly decreased marriages and family size. It makes sense for Jewish communal organizations to be leaders in creating ideal working conditions for attracting talent from the general community and not the talent-draining opposite.

In this difficult economic period, this is not the time for women's issues to retreat to a back burner, like a forgotten cholent. We cannot afford to run our Jewish world on anything less than a meritocracy. *Leveling the Playing Field* provides timely coaching in making this happen.