**Navigating change from within: The impact and challenges of a women’s virtual community in transforming gender dynamics in the IDF army**

## Abstract

## This case study examines the impact of an informal virtual community of professional women (VCoP) in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on changing gender dynamics in the organization. Through interviews and focus groups with 14 community members, we explored the community’s evolution from a support group to an officially recognized channel for organizational knowledge dissemination. Findings reveal the emergence of an alternative narrative ​​ substantiated by practices that empowered women and challenged the army’s dominant patriarchal discourse. The community contributed to the wider organization in three ways: building trust based on information and knowledge sharing, contributing to valuable organizational initiatives, and demonstrating the value of non-hierarchical and cross-organizational communication. The study highlighted the significant role of virtual communities in leading gender-oriented organizational change and furthering the understanding of gender dynamics and bottom-up change in organizations. It offers insights into the potential of virtual communities as catalysts for organizational development.

**Keywords:** virtual communities of practice, gender equity, organizational change, narrative, military

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This study examined the impact of women’s informal virtual communities (VCs) in military organizations, focusing on a case study in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The study seeks to understand how these VCs of practice (VCoPs) can foster organizational change, challenge patriarchal norms, and support women's advancement in traditionally masculine environments (Levy, 2020; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018). The study highlights how this VC transitioned from an informal group to a recognized entity influencing institutional practices (Delanty, 2012; Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019).

The study addresses a lacuna in the existing literature regarding women’s impact on organizational change in military environments, particularly through informal and virtual communication channels. Despite the growing attention to gender dynamics in military contexts, there is still limited research on how women drive structural change in these hierarchical and conservative institutions (O’Mahony et al., 2017; O’Brien et al., 2023). We aimed to fill this gap by examining how a VC of women not only empowered its members but also helped lead organizational changes to accommodate career women in the IDF (Morgan, 2015; Shafran-Gittleman, 2018).

An army’s ontological narrative typically derives from values ​​of heroism and sacrifice for a higher purpose (Phillips et al., 2021). In the Israeli context, the IDF’s founding narrative is that it is the “people’s army” (Hadar & Hakkinen, 2020), implying the duty of all citizens to serve. This narrative sometimes contradicts the reality for IDF women, who, over the years, have been excluded from certain combat roles and promotions (Christensen, 2021). The study examines how a female VC can offer an alternative gender narrative challenging the dominant discourse, providing different perspectives on identity and roles in the military (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Moreover, insights are presented regarding how informal women’s networks can catalyze organizational change in similarly hierarchical and conservative institutions.

**Review of the Literature**

**Women in the IDF: Historical Development and Contemporary Challenges**

Since its establishment in 1948, the IDF has mandated the conscription of all eligible Israeli citizens, male and female, at the age of 18 (Shafran-Gittleman, 2018). Ongoing challenges and gradual change have characterized the history of women’s integration into the Israeli army. Early in the IDF’s journey, women were generally limited to administrative and combat-supporting positions, mainly out of concern of harm or capture (Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2019). However, over the years, there has been significant demand and subsequent progress in integrating women into combat and officer roles.

Tekoah et al. (2021) shed light on the unique physical and mental challenges women face in combat roles. A significant turning point in this development was the change in the definition of combat fitness to “personal combat fitness” in 2017, a step that provided a more egalitarian opportunity for ability assessment and contributed to the promotion of women in career military service (Amir, 2022).

Over 15 years, the number of women serving as combat soldiers increased sixfold, from 435 in 2005 to 2,700 in 2017 (Eran-Jona & Padan, 2018). Today, women are integrated into light infantry, the Border Police, the Home Front Command’s search and rescue units, air defense, Navy diving and towing units, electronic warfare, and the field intelligence corps. As of 2020, women comprised approximately 33% of IDF recruits (Harel, 2023).

According to IDF spokesperson’s data (updated May 2022; Shoresh, 2022)) women comprised about 45% of the officers in the ranks of second lieutenant and lieutenant and about 30% in the ranks of captain and major. Beyond the rank of major, women’s proportion drops sharply: approximately 20% in the rank of lieutenant colonel, 10% in the rank of colonel, 4% in the rank of brigadier general, and 6% in the rank of major general.

Thus, significant challenges still exist despite progress, as noted by Sasson-Levy and Amram-Katz (2007), who suggested that regendering processes sometimes raise opposition from some religious groups seeking to maintain gender gaps. In addition, Levy (2020) highlighted the challenges from religious groups opposing the integration of women in combat roles, while H. & Bar-Schindler (2022) revealed old-generation resistance to IDF gender intermingling. Gender integration in the organization, then, is viewed as a gradual process requiring constant confirmation of its practicality and contribution to the organization and its needs.

As in many armies worldwide, the IDF is undergoing a process of adapting to a more diverse population that includes women in influential positions (Berry & Kalin, 1997). However, unlike armies such as those of Australia, Canada, or the U.S., women in the IDF serve relatively close to home and within the country’s borders, which facilitates maintaining a balance between military service and family life (Ben-Shalom et al., 2019; Tekoah et al., 2021). In other countries’ military organizations, women are often sent on overseas missions, including combat zones, posing significant challenges to managing family life (Wadham et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2024).

At the same time, Sasson-Levy and Amram-Katz (2007) claimed that, unlike other Western armies that have undergone significant acculturation processes with the entry of women into their ranks, the IDF’s reality differs. They suggested that women’s service in the IDF does not necessarily signify gender equality in the organization; in fact, the army often maintains a hierarchical gender regime and a deeply masculine culture. Whereas other armies have undergone adaptation processes, including changes in codes of language and gender behavior and even reorganization of physical structures, the changes in the IDF are perceived as having been slower and more culturally challenging (Tekoah et al., 2021; Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2019).

Responding to these challenges, the IDF is developing various initiatives, such as mentoring programs for female officers, adjusting service tracks for families, and setting targets for integrating women into key positions (Shafran-Gittleman, 2018). However, change is slow and requires continuous dealing with deep-rooted cultural and organizational challenges.

### **Organizational Narratives and Gender Identity in the Military**

Organizations create narratives to define perceptions of reality, reinforce cohesion, and imbue meaning for those who adopt them (Hearn & Collinson, 2017). Analyzing these narratives can reveal the underlying organizational culture and the organization’s evolving social structures (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001).

Two main types of narratives emerge in organizational contexts: *ontological narratives*, the official stories articulated by the organization to communicate its essence, goals, and the foundational structure of working relationships (Scott, 1986), and *conceptual narratives*, alternative stories developed by individuals or subgroups that offer a different perspective on the organization. Conceptual narratives, in particular, allow for exploring identity, role, and the nuanced experiences of individuals and smaller groups within the broader organizational framework (Banihani et al., 2013; Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020).

In the military context, the organizational narrative is based on the values of heroism and sacrifice for a greater cause (Phillips et al., 2021). In the IDF, one of the central narratives is that of a “people’s army” (Hadar & Hakkinen, 2020), implying the obligation of all citizens to serve. Despite the changes in recent years regarding the inclusion of women in prized security and combat positions (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022; Shafran-Gittleman, 2018), the male security narrative remained dominant, especially in senior positions (Christensen, 2021).

Gender narratives in the military are influenced by traditional perceptions of masculinity and physical strength. Karazi-Presler et al. (2018) argued that the Israeli military maintains a hierarchical gender regime and a deeply masculine culture, even as women are integrated into combat roles. These narratives affect the identity of female soldiers, who are often required to adopt ‘masculine’ behaviors to succeed.

While the hierarchical system and male-dominated culture have long been ingrained in the army’s identity, the gradual integration of women into combat roles presents a challenge to this narrative. By adapting to fit into combat roles, women demonstrate the diverse competencies they bring to military units, thereby benefiting the organization as a whole (Amir, 2022). This process is an example of a narrative shift that affects gender perceptions in the organization.

Upon analyzing gender dynamics, it becomes evident that alternative narratives often arise from a need to articulate and challenge the gendered inequities in male-dominated organizations (Vaara et al., 2016; Keenoy et al., 1997). Harel-Shalev et al. (2019) emphasized that personal narratives, much like conceptual narratives, challenge the dominant masculine framework by offering a counter-story highlighting women’s struggles, coping mechanisms, and the gendered dynamics often silenced in official narratives.

An examination of these narratives can yield a better understanding of how virtual communities of women can serve as a lever for gender change in military organizations, where patriarchal and hierarchical narratives remain dominant (Katzenstein, 1999; Vaara et al., 2016).

### **Women VCoPs and Their Influence on Organizational Change**

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) defined VCoPs as “groups of people who share an interest or passion for something they do and learn to do it better through regular interaction” (p. 2). These communities contribute to connecting employees to the organization, improving knowledge management, and encouraging innovation (Blanchard & Horan, 2000; Dei & van der Walt, 2020). Even without a physical location, VCoPs promote social action, create shared social capital, and produce a system of symbols that can change the organization from the bottom up (Delanty, 2012). Community leaders significantly influence the topics discussed, the type of knowledge transmitted, and the shaping of the boundaries of discourse (Almog et al., 2016).

Studies have shown that the gender composition of virtual communities affects the style and content of their communication (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020; Shen & Khalifa, 2014). In women’s communities, shared comprise a more dominant topic than organizational structure and hierarchy (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022). Miño-Puigcercós et al. (2019) found that these groups facilitate women’s free expression, enabling them to share feminist experiences without fear of hostile reaction.

Female VCs provide a safe space for transferring knowledge and experience, as well as the potential to promote dialogue between the individual and the organization. Thus, the VC may take on the features of a radical group that challenges an existing social or organizational structure (Moffitt, 1999), contesting formal power relations, especially in organizations based on hierarchy (Dei & van der Walt, 2020). However, this type of activism that originates in a virtual framework can continue into the actual organizational space.

In the military context, these VCs face unique challenges, as the military's hierarchical and longstanding masculine structure poses difficulties for women serving in it (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022). The current study highlights the role of female VCoPs in the IDF in advancing organizational change from the bottom up.

### **Wonder Women - IDF Virtual-Intracommunity of Professional Soldiers**

Within this context, two career women established a virtual community in 2016 to provide support and knowledge to other professional women in the IDF. Seven years later, one of the women, Hadas, continues to serve as its administrator and leader. *Wonder Women* was established to provide a forum for sharing experiences related to parenting while serving in the military, with the specific purpose of offering information and support to IDF women on maternity leave or in the process of returning to active duty in the military organization. Over time, the community grew, and several members formed subcommunities to address additional specific issues. These groups addressed topics such as female career soldiers undergoing fertility treatment and pregnant or breastfeeding soldiers. Additionally, they provided career advice, discussions on relevant roles, command issues, and forum-based presentations, among other issues. At the time of the current study, the community numbered more than 4,000 women (H. Update 21.9.24). Currently, Wonder Women is a formal, recognized VCoP, operating intra-organizationally, contributing significantly to organizational knowledge and boundaries, and serving specific members (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022).

The Wonder Women community is unique in several respects. Unlike typically top-down organization communities, Wonder Women was founded by the members, specifically women career soldiers, to serve their own needs. The community provided a safe environment within a predominantly male military organization where women in career service could freely exchange advice and opinions. The community has maintained continuous daily activity for several years, with membership steadily growing. For two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to its virtual format on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, the community organized more than 30 face-to-face meetings at various locations, including members’ homes and children’s playgrounds, further strengthening the bonds among its members. These unique features contributed to the influence of Wonder Women on changes in the IDF, paying specific attention to the women in career service.

This study focuses on the distinctive intersection between virtual communities of practice (VCoPs), gender, and military organizations. While previous studies emphasized the importance of VCs in organizational knowledge management (e.g., Dei & van der Walt, 2020) and examined studied gender dynamics in the Israeli army (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018), the current study expands on these insights to examine the influence of an informal women’s group on organizational change in the military context. Based on the work of Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) on VCoPs and of Vaara et al. (2016) on organizational narratives, this study aims to understand how women use these groups to create and promote alternative narratives. The study’s goals align with the work of Katzenstein (1999) on gender activism in organizations, extending the context to the military.

We posited a central research question: How can informal VCs of women in military organizations influence organizational change processes; how do they challenge and reshape existing gender narratives? Several sub-questions were posited: What role does the VC play in the professional and personal lives of women serving in the military? How does the VC’s activity influence the existing organizational narrative and promote organizational change? What challenges and complexities are involved in the community’s transition from a covert to an overt space within the military organization?

## **Methods**

**Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study method, adopting a phenomenological approach. Drawing on Yin’s (2013) conceptual framework, we explored the unique features of a specific phenomenon by investigating the sense of belonging and well-being of the women in this community, adhering to the principle that insights from a single case study can be generalized to broader contexts.

## **Data Collection**

First, an initial, semi-structured interview with Wonder Women's founder was conducted via virtual video call based on call protocol (Adeoye‐Olatunde & Olenik, 2021) to ascertain the need for the community and its goals. Then, we conducted a focus group with seven of the 13 other VC managers to identify particular interests, roles, hierarchical positions, or connections to social networks as reflected in the participants’ statements or actions (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). These participants were asked to describe the community’s founding, their personal story of joining, and the importance of the community for them and other members, including addressing current challenges and future expectations. The questions focused on each person’s individual narrative and on how they experienced and interpreted the VC’s role and meaning for them. Finally, a letter was sent to all the members of the community inviting them to participate in an interview in which they could describe their perspective on the community’s activities and their personal relationship with the VC. Our questions to the eight individual interviewees who responded positively to our letter of inquiry led to a deeper understanding of the VC’s response to its members. Expanding the number of interviewees aimed to reaffirm interpretations or examine alternative versions.

## Our academic institution’s ethics committee approved this study. All sessions were recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent. Each interviewee and focus group was told that the conversation could be halted at any time. Pseudonyms were used for the participants’ names as well as for their military units and positions. We received approval to reveal the VC’s name.

## **Participants**

Sixteen community members shared their views on their community. The participants were women with varied ranks, military seniority, and military positions in order to elicit rich and diverse information. The interviewees’ ages ranged from 25 to 38. Most were mothers and served in the organization at mid-level ranks, ranging from captain to lieutenant colonel, with only a few participants at a higher rank (colonel) or lower rank (lieutenant or warrant officer). The participants served in various roles: administrative (57%), technological (15%), and professional (28%), such as legal, logistics, and computing.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using open coding, a method suitable for obtaining valid and reliable results from textual data (Charmaz, 2000). The responses were then subjected to content analysis. To increase inter-judge reliability, the researchers’ analyses were compared and re-examined until consensus was reached on the narrative, yielding “…a shared construction of experience and meaning,” as described by Lyman (1997, p. 14).The familiarity of some of the researchers with the specific research field facilitated our understanding of the participants’ language and nuances; however, reflection and critical teamwork were required to formulate categories and themes. These aspects strengthened the study's internal validity, aligning with Casula et al. (2021).

## **Results**

Three central themes emerged from the interviews based on the participants’ personal and communal narratives describing their work in the organization, presented below. The themes illustrated the practices and knowledge shared in the VC, which is referred to as *Eshet Hayil* in Hebrew (English adaptation: *Wonder Women*). These themes portrayed their efforts to adapt the organization to the needs of the military career of women with children and the significance that the organizational change they promoted has had on their identity within the organization.

### **Theme 1: The Impact of the Community on the Lives of Women Serving in the Military**

### Theme 1 highlights the life experience of women in the armed forces. This male-dominant organization does not freely share important information with women, making it difficult to achieve a work-family balance. Hanna shared the loneliness of a woman on maternity leave in the military organization:

We set up Wonder Women [to] bridge the gap in bonding and networking that was created by women giving birth, moving aside for a few months … you’re alone. Suddenly, I’m at home with a baby. ... and the dissonance between that and what I was before seems to be very strong... you suddenly find that you need to search for information.

The quote illustrates Hanna's motivation for establishing the community due to the complete disconnect she felt from her army career during this period, partly due to communications security. The VC responded to this need by sharing information and offering support.

Ilana emphasized the commonality and partnership among the community members:

...you can call it a partnership of fate…. Ours is a social community... the values ​​are based on a mutual guarantee and commitment stemming from a common denominator... my lifestyle and yours are very, very similar because we are both females serving in the army. We may also both be mothers and career women who want to advance...

Ilana’s words expressed the sense of camaraderie and mutual guarantee between the women that form the basis for the establishment and activity of the VC.

Gadot described another aspect of the VC, emphasizing the advantage and importance of a VC comprising women with shared concerns rather than having to rely on their commanding officers who are expected to provide them with these services:

...The bottom line is that the officer in charge of soldiers’ welfare is merely a [young] girl [in her regular army service], and so is the company officer. Like, they’re all young girls, and [in the VC] I have the opportunity [to consult] with a slightly wider community of women, with [veteran] commanders who have been through a thing or two in their lives...

These female career soldiers expressed their need for empathy and understanding in their pursuit of integration into the worlds of home, family, and career, which are not generally addressed in the military organization’s traditional agenda or the training of its officials. The female VC introduces an alternative organizational structure and discourse that aligns with basic values aimed at serving its members. This networked and egalitarian model of a VC stands as an alternative to the military organization’s hierarchical structure and masculine culture.

Thus, Theme 1 reveals the marginalization and the complexity of women’s lives as a minority within an organization with a dominant masculine culture. For them, the VC is a place for sharing and receiving information, support, and connecting with other women based on common needs and challenges.

### **Theme 2: Challenges in Transitioning the Community’s Activism From a Covert to an Overt Space in the Military Organization**

The discourse in the VC network established a sense of camaraderie with many other women in the organization and has led to activism aiming to provide personal solutions for community members, expand professional connections, the construction of a framework, and community ethics.

Hanna described the disparity that women felt between their needs and the responses provided by the organization even after returning to work after maternity leave:

We established this VC... “[Wonder Women is] a platform of women’s initiatives … without the control of anyone in the organization. Nobody can say that it belongs to them[or that we]did or didn’t meet our targets. What we built [is] our response to so many problems ... We have this community that solves our problems in a minute…

Hanna emphasized the desire to create a platform to provide support and relevant information for women seeking to integrate their personal and professional lives. On the basis of other VC models, Wonder Womenwas adapted to the specific needs of women in a military organization. Miriam recounted an example in the VC of helping with indecision concerning a timeline:

The VC encompasses a discourse on career vs. home and the tension and dilemmas in these areas, issues related to specific groups regarding childbirth and maternity leave... and other dilemmas like whether to remain in the career army...something about the experience of Wonder Women helped me sort things out… ...There are many women here with many army postings. If someone wants to change army postings [to another job within the IDF], she can anonymously submit [in the VC] what she is looking for and interested in... [The VC is] more diverse and provides an answer that cannot be received from [the army’s] formal sources.

This quote illustrates the VC as responding to dilemmas surrounding age, one’s current and future career, the connection between the two, and family demands that increase over time as the children grow. The network of female activity and the opportunity to participate in it helps remedy the feeling of isolation and yields a different discourse, one characterized by a gender narrative that has yet to find a place in the organization’s dominant masculine space.

This horizontal information-sharing challenges the traditional hierarchical military narrative, representing a new gender-based organizational narrative. It represents the collective activism of women, reshaping military discourse to reflect their unique needs and experiences, in contrast to the dominant, male-centric narrative of strict hierarchy and command. Rona described the service that the community provides to women in a space where the codes and rules are set by men:

I see the mothers [in the career army] everywhere, ... most of their environment is very tough male, and maybe they are also a kind of persecuted minority––I don’t like to use the word ‘persecuted,’ but I will say it––within a male chauvinist macho organization. Maybe that’s also what helped them ... we really, really need each other. And they have their cliques, ... the jokes... I was also in such units, you know, it’s the ‘guy’ jokes…, so that’s how they also ensure [advancing] to positions and many other things in the army.

The women’s need for mutual support, in view of being a minority within an organization whose culture is masculine and chauvinistic, emphasizes the importance of the VC for the women as a place of sharing, understanding, and proactive support in their military career. Hanna expanded on the VC’s response: “Wonder Women provides an alternative to the bottlenecks [of information], and at the same time, women from the VC took all this good out into the people under their command [in the organization].”

An active informal VC was created within the organization that provided the requested responses both to the community members and to other recruits in the organization. Gadot demonstrated how the VC helped women in situations of distress or difficulty:

I am also a member of a Wonder Women sub-group called *Lionesses*; this is a group of women who have had a stillbirth... And I have a very good friend who... from this experience of stillbirth, wrote a post out of her need to vent. From this post, a center for expectant mothers was created – a center for pregnancy, parenting, birth, and everything. So, it’s a crazy VC-generated thing.

This quote highlights the importance of providing a safe and supportive space within a sub-group of Wonder Women. It enabled the group to meet the emotional needs of women and ultimately led to the establishment of more structured support frameworks within the organization.

Thus, Theme 2 portrays how the VC led to the women soldiers’ gender activism that helped them meet their unique challenges and needs. The activism manifested itself in creating a cooperative, supportive, and empowering framework based on values ​​of reciprocity and equality.

### **Theme 3: The Impact of Community Activity on the Existing Organizational Narrative**

The process by which the army recognized the VC required some adaptations by the IDF in light of the male-dominant organizational culture. The VC’s gender activism, until now hidden from view, became visible and is organizationally significant. Nira described the group’s transition from a covert to an open framework:

...today some of the glass ceilings have indeed been broken... [our VC] managed to produce ‘teasers’ that have taken shape in reality...beyond the social network. Senior military officials have commented in the community’s conversation, such as the head of senior staff or the HR chief [head of military personnel]. It has raised women’s problems to the forefront… the VC has managed to be more than just a network group. The community is already dictating practice.

These insights concern the process of change, such as the importance of initiatives coming from the organization’s middle management to the top and the impact of informal networks on organizational change. This impact became evident when senior officials came to speak with the community members, resulting in concrete organizational change. Nira’s words testified to the organization’s recognition of the community and its impact beyond its membership. The organization is increasingly willing to hear and adopt some of the ideas emerging from the community and to convey the organization’s formal messages via the community to the career army women.

Wonder Women’s leaders explained the change in the army’s approach to the community and the change that transpired in the community with its recognition by the organization:

The army embraces the Wonder Women community because it meets the concept of modern femininity today, because it meets the codes of open management, because the community has received recognition from hundreds of women in the organization, because the community is careful to maintain values ​​that match those of the organization such as integrity, confidentiality, [and] not to slander. Because the community gives the army the added value of media topicality and this meets the IDF’s agenda... everything is written in the rules of the Wonder Women group. Of course, we are obligated to some of [these rules] due to our affiliation with the IDF, but together, the rules allow the Wonder Women community to be what it is for each and every one of us.

This quote highlights the process of the VC’s adaptation and regulation. Whereas its values ​​and operating ethics have always aligned with the organization’s values, it was now being challenged to adhere to its procedures before a growing population of female members while maintaining its distinct community character. As Hanna noted, the community’s accumulated experience in discourse on several issues required a process of internal examination and learning, and updates and clarifications needed to be posted periodically on activities and discourse in the community so that the boundaries of ethics and values ​​in the internal community discourse would be preserved.

Miriam, a leader of the Wonder Women VC, discussed how the group contributes to improving women’s service in the organization:

First of all, we take issues that arise in the community very seriously. ...For example, if someone shares their dissatisfaction with a response she received from an organization representative, we investigate the issue to understand if the response was really improper. We are, of course, working to change these occurrences.

This quote shows how the community has become an influential and recognized source by the organization, one that can contribute to the improvement of the organization.

Hanna offered another example of how the VC adheres to the organization’s principles of operation:

[A woman’s] appeal [to the community] for assistance [is done] only after she has contacted the relevant IDF representatives. The complainant contacts the IDF call centers and the professional agencies…. before asking us for help. The community members are happy to help, but it is important for us not to bypass the IDF help centers.

In formal meetings between the organization and the community, the community has been careful to subordinate itself to the organization’s code of hierarchical discourse. Still, the leaders substantiate the change that the community has contributed to the balance of power for women in the army: “...Wonder Women has brought competitiveness to the existing system. It places the official organizational model in a different light. The system is fearful and apprehensive about the Wonder Women group in the system.” The community’s accessibility and diverse exposure have challenged the army as an organization committed to providing services to its members.

Theme 3 involves the encounter between the community of women and the masculine military organization and its impact on each. The community engaged in a process of adjustment and regulation to integrate into the corporate culture. However, it was still able to influence the organization and generate changes within it, leaving a growing recognition of its importance and contribution.

These themes highlight the process that the women’s VC in the military organization underwent as it moved from a covert to an overt presence. First, the community emerged from the women’s need for a supportive and empowering space that would address their unique challenges as a gender minority. The community then became a focus of female activism, manifesting itself in the creation of an alternative discourse and driving processes of change. Finally, the community received organizational recognition and became an influential factor, promoting the status and well-being of women in the organization while redesigning the gender relations within it.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how a women’s VC operated, expanded, and adapted organizational practices for women working in a military organization characterized as male-dominated, totalitarian, and hierarchical. The study’s qualitative methodology, adopting Stebbins’s (2001) approach, allowed us to understand the consequences of the community’s activity as well as the process––the motivation, challenges, and dynamics that shaped its development. The findings provided new insights into the role that VCs can have in organizational and gender change in the military context and the implications for narratives and organizational culture.

Our findings further revealed the Wonder Women VC to be an essential source of support, information, and advice for women serving in the Israeli military regarding personal matters and career issues (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020). The community plays a central role in the professional and personal lives of the women serving in the army, significantly enhancing their service experience (Dei & van der Walt, 2020), allowing them to feel involved in and belonging to the organization through a sense of resilience and organizational support (Blanchard & Horan, 2000).

Wonder Women created a safe space for female discourse that went beyond the boundaries of typical organizational discourse, where women shared experiences without fear of adverse reactions. Thus, the current study expands the existing knowledge about the role of VCs in military organizations and highlights their importance in meeting the distinctive needs of minority groups in an organization.

The community’s transition from a hidden to an open space encompassed significant challenges. The community developed into an interest group that “protests inside institutions” (Katzenstein, 1999, p. 3), hoping to lead to organizational change. This process includes managing the dichotomy between a need to preserve the unique character of the community and the need to adapt its activities to contemporary organizational norms (Eitan & Gazit, 2023; Moffitt, 1999).

The gender activism that developed within the community led to initiatives and personal solutions for community members that expanded professional relationships, created a framework, and established community ethics. This process challenged the existing hierarchical structure and created a more egalitarian network model. Our findings expand the existing knowledge of bottom-up organizational change processes in military organizations and highlight the VC’s potential as a tool for organizational change (Benamar et al., 2021).

The current study revealed how the community developed an alternate narrative that combined the concept of the career woman with family values ​and combat. This narrative of a “combat-unit career woman” was accepted because it corresponds with the ontological narrative of the military organization as a family of fighters who are committed to family values ​​in Israeli society (Hearn & Collinson, 2017; Ben-Shalom et al., 2019; Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2019; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Our findings showed that the community’s work had significantly impacted the existing organizational narrative. Despite the changes that had transpired in recent years regarding women’s inclusion in prized security and combat positions (H. & Bar-Schindler, 2022; Shafran-Gittleman, 2018), the male security narrative remained dominant. The community managed to challenge this narrative and offer an alternative that emphasized the added value of ensuring that military positions would be accessible to women.

Based on our analysis, it is evident that the shift introduced by the women's VC marks a departure from the conventional narrative that highlights the importance of family for male soldiers to a female perspective that values pursuing a career in the military. Reframing the narrative of the family as the combatant’s anchor and source of strength, together with the intimate relationship experienced by those combatants among themselves, converted the inner space of Wonder Women into a network whose key values ​​are family, trust, and immediate support within the military organization. The mirror image of perceiving the family as an anchor––this time, as it manifests for women in the military, different from the existing narrative for male combatants––may have fostered accepting an informal VC of women’s voices into the organizational consensus.

Adopting the alternative narrative gave the informal community a recognized and accepted place in the organization, aligning with similar processes described by Vaara et al. (2016) and Keenoy et al. (1997). As in these scholars’ studies, our findings emphasized the VC’s need to navigate between its conceptual narrative and the ontological narrative of the organization and make certain adjustments and concessions to fit into the existing organizational framework. These insights expand our understanding of how the gender narrative of VCs can influence organizational narratives in the military context.

The community created a new language in the organization. It utilized the advantages of virtuality to provide a quick, broad, and efficient response, suited in its flexibility to women’s work hours (Almog et al., 2020). It presented a non-hierarchical matrix communication model that in itself challenged the existing organizational structure (Dei & van der Walt, 2020) and the ontological narrative of military hierarchy by offering a conceptual narrative of egalitarian and multi-directional communication (Morgan, 2015). The Wonder Women community's commitment to values of trust, support, and partnership aligns with existing IDF values ​​but amplifies them in the context of a VC (Shen & Khalifa, 2019).

The VC also created an opening for those who are not in the prestigious combat units to voice their contribution of knowledge and opinion and to be heard by the organization’s leaders (Tekoah et al., 2021). This combination of narratives allowed for a new synergy that drove organizational change by addressing women’s rights and needs. Additionally, it facilitated a more efficient utilization of the female workforce, expediting the organizational streamlining of human resources that the IDF has been striving for in recent years (Ben-Shalom et al., 2019; Levy, 2020).

Theoretically, our research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in organizations, bottom-up change processes, and interactions between formal and informal structures (Acker, 1990; Gherardi & Poggio, 2001). The impact of gender dynamics within an organization can be observed through fostering reflection, diversity, and variety in organizational thinking. These elements can facilitate an examination of personal and organizational actions, an essential move for any organization, particularly military organizations (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

The current study also increases the understanding of the role that virtual communities can have in leading gender-focused organizational change. Our findings underscore the potential of online spaces in empowering alternative voices, providing a platform for the unique needs of women, and promoting an inclusive work environment (Shen & Khalifa, 2014). At the same time, the study also elucidates the complexity and tensions involved in the VC’s transition process from the hidden space to the visible one and the need for adjustments and compromises with the existing organizational norms.

On a practical level, the insights from our research may provide guidelines for organizations interested in promoting gender equality. These may include encouraging employee initiatives, creating alternative discourse spaces, and implementing practices adapted to a variety of needs and identities (Banihani et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2020).

Although this study focused solely on women in a small sample within an Israeli military organization, its qualitative research findings offer insights that extend beyond this particular context and can be applied to other organizations with a similar structure. Consistent with the findings of Casula et al. (2021) and Yin (2013), the study’s insights have external validity that can enhance the comprehension of broader social phenomena like gender integration and organizational change in other centralized and hierarchal organizations worldwide (Williams & Connor, 2024; Wadham et al., 2016; King, 2013). The gender dynamics and challenges of integrating women into key positions are universal issues, and the community developed in the IDF and its communication channel can be viewed as a relevant working model for other countries facing similar challenges.

Future research will be able to examine the resilience of the community over time, monitoring relevant organizational and political changes, such as the increase in Jewish ultra-Orthodox recruits (Levy, 2010). Other disadvantaged groups in the military may also be studied, adding information and knowledge to the organization. A future study comparing female VCs in the military of different countries could examine their differences and similarities in their dynamics, challenges, and impact on the organization. The long-term impact of the VC can be collected regarding the promotion rates of women in the army, their satisfaction with their service, and changes in the organizational culture over time. Such research can strengthen the external validity and long-term durability of the findings and provide broader insights into the role of VCs in initiating change in organizations generally, particularly in the military.

### **Conclusion**

This study revealed how an informal VC can lead to significant change in a hierarchical and conservative organization such as the army. Women in the military used technology to create a safe space, develop an alternative narrative, and influence organizational policies and practices.

The study illuminates the potential of online spaces in promoting gender equality, along with the complexity and challenges involved in this process, especially in hierarchical and traditional organizations such as the military. The findings highlight the importance of creating safe spaces for dialogue and sharing and the need for a flexible and culturally sensitive approach to managing organizational change.

The challenges of integrating women into key positions, creating an inclusive work environment, and changing organizational culture are universal, and the community studied here offers important insights for dealing with these challenges.

Finally, the study highlights the need for a holistic approach to organizational change, combining bottom-up initiatives with institutional support. It shows that real change requires not only policy changes but also narrative, organizational culture, and the communication, as well as interaction between the organization’s members.

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