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

## Abstract

This case study examines the impact of an informal VCs of practice (VCoPs), of professional women 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

Introduction

This study examined the impact of women’s informal virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) in military organizations, focusing on a case study in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The study seeks to understand how these VCoPs can foster organizational change, challenge patriarchal norms, and support women's advancement in traditionally masculine environments (Levy, 2020; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2023). The study highlights how this VCoP transitioned from an informal group to a recognized entity influencing institutional practices (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015; 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 (Wadham et al., 2016; Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). We aimed to fill this gap by examining how a VCoP of women not only empowered its members but also helped lead organizational changes to accommodate career women in the IDF (Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2007; Shafran-Gittleman, 2018).

An army’s ontological narrative typically derives from values ​​of heroism and sacrifice for a higher purpose (Do & Samuels, 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 (Ben-Shalom et al., 2019). The study examines how a female VCoP can offer an alternative gender narrative challenging the dominant discourse, providing different perspectives on identity and roles in the military. 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). Although the 2000 amendment to the Security Service Law permits opening all military roles to women, except those subject to specific limitations, the reality on the ground is different: recruitment for IDF positions is still primarily based on gender classification, with only about 86% of positions open to women (Daphna-Tekoah et al., 2020). This stands in contrast to many Western nations that have already adopted qualification-based recruitment policies, driven by a commitment to full equal opportunities (Fieldhouse & O'Leary, 2023).

In the Israeli context, the challenge is particularly complex due to cultural and political considerations, specifically the issue of mixed-gender service alongside religious soldiers - a factor that significantly influences organizational decision-making (Levy, 2020; Ben-Shalom et al., 2019). Following petitions submitted to the Supreme Court on this matter, a committee in 2007 recommended the integration of women into elite units, emphasizing professional criteria over gender considerations (Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2023).

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-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2020).

According to IDF spokesperson’s data (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.

Significant challenges persist despite progress. Already in 2007, Sasson-Levy and Amram-Katz suggested that re-gendering processes raise opposition from religious groups seeking to maintain gender gaps. Levy (2020) later documented growing resistance from religious segments in Israeli society opposing women's integration in combat roles, while H. & Bar-Schindler (2022) revealed resistance within the military itself, particularly from old-generation commanders regarding women's professional advancement and command positions. Gender integration in the organization remains a gradual process requiring constant confirmation of its practicality and contribution to organizational needs. 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 women in influential positions (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2020; Wadham et al., 2016). However, while the IDF's operational environment requires women's continuous involvement in a high-threat environment and various emergency situations in Israel, their work-home balance experience differs from their counterparts in other militaries. Unlike Western armies such as those of Australia, Canada, the U.S., or the Nordic countries, women in the IDF serve relatively close to home and within the country's borders, which facilitates maintaining a work-family balance (Ahlbäck et al., 2024; Fieldhouse & O'Leary, 2023; Reizer et al., 2023).

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 (Daphna-Tekoah et al., 2020; Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2023).

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; Cheryan & Markus, 2020).

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 (Budrytė & Vainauskienė, 2023; Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020).

In the military context, the organizational narrative is based on the values of heroism and sacrifice for a greater cause (Do & Samuels, 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 (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

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 (Shahar-Druk & Druk, 2023). 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 & Daphna-Tekoah (2020) 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 (Dei & van der Walt, 2020; Eitan & Gazit, 2023; Cohen, & Netzer, 2023). 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 (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Community leaders significantly influence the topics discussed, the type of knowledge transmitted, and the shaping of the boundaries of discourse (Eitan& Gazit, 2023; Kohntopp & McCann, 2020; Schulte et al, 2020).

Studies have shown that the gender composition of virtual communities affects the style and content of their communication (Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020; Schulte et al., 2020). 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 gender-relevant experiences without fear of hostile reaction.

Female VCoPs provide a safe space for transferring knowledge and experience, as well as the potential to promote dialogue between the individual and the organization (Syafira & Mulyono, 2024; Wang et al., 2022). Thus, the VCoPs may take on the features of a radical group that challenges an existing social or organizational structure, contesting formal power relations, especially in organizations based on hierarchy (Budrytė & Vainauskienė, 2023). However, this type of activism that originates in a virtual framework can continue into the actual organizational space.

### In the military context, these VCoPs face unique challenges, as the military's hierarchical and masculine structure poses significant structural and cultural challenges for women's integration (Reizer et al., 2023; Levy, 2020). 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 military 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. & Bar-Schindler, 2022; updated through personal communication, September 2024 ). Currently, Wonder Women is a informal but well known VCoP in the IDF, contributing to shere organizational knowledge with her 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 (Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). The community has maintained continuous daily activity for several years, with membership steadily growing, demonstrating the importance of informal communities in military contexts (Schulte et al., 2020). 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 (2015) 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 do informal VCoPs of women in military organizations influence organizational change processes; how do they challenge and modify existing gender narratives? Several sub-questions were posited: What role does the VCoP play in the professional and personal lives of women serving in the military? 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**

The data collection process comprised three phases of semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Initially, we conducted a virtual video interview with Wonder Women's founder to understand the field and explore the community's core mission and establishment rationale. The second phase involved a focus group with seven of the 13 VCoP managers, exploring their motivations for joining, management approaches, and perspectives on community dynamics (Charmaz, 2000). Finally, we extended an invitation to all community members to share their personal experiences. Eight members responded, participating in individual interviews that focused on their personal narratives and experiences within the community.

The interview protocols were tailored to each group: leadership-focused questions for the founder, management-oriented discussions with the VCoP managers, and experience-based narratives from individual members. This multi-layered approach aimed to capture diverse perspectives and validate our interpretations of the community's impact.

Our academic institution’s ethics committee approved this study. All sessions were recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent. Each interviewee and focus group were 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 VCoP’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. 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, aligning with recommendations for exploratory research (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 VCoP, 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 Mothers Serving in the Military**

### Theme 1 highlights the experiences of military women, particularly mothers, reveal how organizational structures and practices in this male-dominated institution create unique challenges for work-family balance. The community plays a crucial role in this context, as highlighted by Hanna's account of the isolation experienced during maternity leave:

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 VCoP 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 content of the VCoP.

Gadot emphasizing the advantage and importance of a VCoP comprising mature women with shared concerns:

...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 VCoP] 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 balancing home, family, and career - aspects not typically addressed in military organizational culture or officer training. The VCoP's networked and egalitarian model emerged as an alternative to the military'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 VCoP 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 14 weeks of maternity leave:

We established this VCoP... “[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 VCoP models, Wonder Womenwas adapted to the specific needs of women that were not addressed by the formal army framework.. Miriam recounted an example in the VCoP of helping with indecision concerning a timeline:

The VCoP 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 VCoP] what she is looking for and interested in... [The VCoP is] more diverse and provides an answer that cannot be received from [the army’s] formal sources.

This quote illustrates the VCoP 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 VCoP for the women as a place of sharing, understanding, and proactive support in their military career. Hanna expanded on the VCoP’s response: “Wonder Women provides an alternative to the bottlenecks [of information], and at the same time, women from the VCoP took all this good out into the people under their command [in the organization].”

 An active informal VCoP 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 VCoP 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 VCoP-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 VCoP 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 VCoP required some adaptations by the IDF in light of the male-dominant organizational culture. The VCoP’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 VCoP] 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 VCoP 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 VCoP’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 VCoP, 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 VCoP 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 VCoP 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 says Nira: “...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 VCoP 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 VCoP 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 VCoPs 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; Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019).

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 (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2020). Recent longitudinal research has shown that women in combat units face ongoing structural and cultural challenges affecting their integration and retention (Reizer et al., 2023), making such supportive communities particularly crucial. The community facilitated open discussion of these gender-specific challenges (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018), thus expanding the existing knowledge about the role of VCs in military organizations and highlighting 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 (Schulte et al., 2020; Dei & van der Walt, 2020).

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 (Wang et al., 2022; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

An alternate narrative combined the career woman with family values and combat. This narrative of a "combat-unit career woman" aligns with the military's narrative of a family of fighters committed to family values in Israeli society. The Israeli context is reflected in Israel having the highest birth rate among OECD countries at 2.9 children per woman (Jewish News Syndicate, 2023; Weinreb et al., 2018).

The community's work significantly impacted the existing organizational narrative. Despite recent changes regarding women's inclusion in security and combat positions (Reizer et al., 2023; Shafran-Gittleman, 2018), the male security narrative remained dominant. The VC managed to challenge this narrative by offering an alternative that emphasized military positions accessible to women.

The shift introduced by the women's VC marks a departure from the conventional narrative of family importance for male soldiers to a female perspective of pursuing a military career. The narrative of family as combatant's anchor together with intimate relationships converted Wonder Women into a network valuing family alongside career, trust, and support within the military organization (Ben-Shalom et al., 2019; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

Adopting the alternative narrative gave the informal community a recognized and accepted place in the organization, aligning with processes described in classic organizational studies (Keenoy et al., 1997) and confirmed in contemporary research (Vaara et al., 2016). 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 developed a distinctive organizational language and communication patterns. By utilizing virtual platforms, it enabled rapid, widespread, and flexible responses that accommodated women's work schedules (Kohntopp & McCann, 2020; Schulte et al., 2020; Almog et al., 2020). This new communal discourse introduced a non-hierarchical matrix communication model, challenging both the traditional organizational structure (Dei & van der Walt, 2020) and the military's hierarchical narrative by promoting egalitarian and multi-directional dialogue (Keenoy et al., 1997; Williams & Connor, 2024). While the Wonder Women community's emphasis on trust, support, and partnership aligned with core IDF values, it reimagined these values within the VC context (Schulte et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022).

The VC also created an opening for those who are not in the prestigious combat units to share their knowledge and expertise, increasing their visibility within the organization (Daphna-Tekoah et al., 2020). This merging of narratives allowed for a new synergy that drove organizational change by addressing women’s rights and needs. Additionally, it enhanced organizational communication efficiency and responsiveness to service members' needs, aligning with the IDF's recent efforts to improve internal communication channels (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 (Hearn & Collinson, 2017; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). 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 (Schulte et al., 2020; Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). At the same time, the study also elucidates the complexity and tensions involved in the VC’s transition process from the covert space to the overt 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 (Budrytė & Vainauskienė, 2023; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

Although this study focused solely on women in a small sample within an Israeli military organization, its . 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 (Sasson-Levy & Amram-Katz, 2007; Wadham et al., 2016; Reizer et al., 2023).

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 men Jewish ultra-Orthodox recruits (Levy, 2020). 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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