**Navigating Gender Ethics in Unsettled Times:**

**How High-Tech Managers Deal with Ambivalent Gender Regimes** **in Israel and the U.S.**

1. **Scientific Background**

Many Western societies find themselves at a critical juncture as they navigate political struggles and ideological polarization regarding social equality in general, and gender equality in particular. Conservative and liberal currents have been clashing for several decades, each proposing alternative models of gendered identities (Ely and Kimmel 2018; Knights and Pullen 2019; Pecis and Priola 2019; Frenkel 2023). The proposed study examines how these cultural clashes are interpreted by managers in high-tech organizations in two cultural contexts, the United States and Israel.

Unsettled times have an empirical significance both in the Israeli and U.S. context. The use of the term *unsettled times* is analytically important for the present study. Ann Swidler (1986, 2023) referred to the meaning of unsettled times and showed how the cultural interpretive toolkit becomes clearer when people feel they are in the midst of a conflict or crisis which requires a reorganization of their lives and the adoption of new ways of being. During unsettled times, when actors’ cultural repertoires do not contain the tools needed to address a given situation, this normally automatic process is replaced with more effortful, deliberate cognition (Cerulo 2010; Heimer 2001). In these moments, reflexivity emerges as culture becomes “explicit,” and likely also creates behavioral change (Swidler 1986: 280). Indeed, the preliminary findings that inform the proposed study shed light on the reflexive meaning of unsettled times among male subjects in the organizational day-to-day regarding the ethics of gender equality.

Currently, in what some refer to as the postliberal age, the ethics of social equality are under an unprecedented attack (Deneen 2019; Nelson 2019). Many countries, including the U.S., Hungary, Poland, and Israel, are experiencing both societal and governmental reactions to previously (and recently) accepted ideologies of equality (Revers 2023). In illiberal populist regimes (as in Hungary and Poland), the politics of gender equality function as a unifying symbol for all that is seen as problematic with liberalism. Family mainstreaming and opposition to women’s rights serve as the backbone of the illiberal ideology (Grzebalska and Pető 2018; Dietze and Roth 2020). In the U.S., these cultural clashes culminated with the 2016 election of Donald Trump, who sought to restore the traditional social order, reviving a traditional, imagined machismo version of masculinity (Ferree 2001; Hochschild 2018; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Schwarz 2023; Hammer 2023). Another turning point in the U.S. struggle occurred in 2023, when its Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion and ended affirmative action in college admissions (Lamont 2023). Lastly, Trump’s return to the presidency in the U.S. indicated the entrenchment of populism in its struggle against liberalism, with potentially significant implications for both American and Israeli societies.

With regard to issues of gender (in-)equality and its moral consequences, Daub (2024) analyzed the global expansion of “cancel culture” beyond the United States. In West European countries, as moral panic among conservative but also left-leaning individuals and shows that the global preoccupation with the issue has turned into embattled liberalism. Thus, feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles are labeled as crusades and the opposition to them is manifested in different local ways. In France, for example, the protest is against “le wokism,” in the UK it is against the “loony left,” and in Germany the focus is on opposing gender studies.

Such unsettled times are particularly evident in the Israeli context, where an extreme rightwing coalition has adopted an explicitly antiliberal and anti-genderism Agenda (Frenkel 2023; Herzberg-Druker 2023). As part of the attempted judicial overhaul and financed by American-Jewish doners, for example through the Kohelet Policy Forum, these process has resulted in pushing women out of the top managements of state organizations and ministries (Dori 2023). The social crises in Israel have become intensified and radicalized. Specifically, the Hamas Attack on October 7, 2023, signaled the beginning of a prolonged war, unsettling social realities and deepening divisions and conflicts in practically every aspect of national sociopolitical life. War affects women and men in various ways, with issues of power, gender, ethics, and morality playing central roles. It is still difficult to predict the nature of the postwar gender order, but the war will clearly be central to the findings of the proposed study. For example, it is already evident that the prolonged war has strengthened anti-progressive, nationalist, militarist and hyper-masculine trends, and may therefore increase the widening social and gender inequalities (Karazi-Presler and Sasson-Levy 2024).

Given that organizations are major contexts in which cultural meanings are shaped and materialize (Swidler 2023), attacks on gender equality issues require an empirical examination of how they trickle down into organizational life, and how these processes vary by cultural context. The goal of the proposed study is to conduct a comparative examination of perceptions of gender equality ethics (defined here as the application of gendered moral beliefs) among women and men in high-tech work environments presumed to be characterized by egalitarian ethics. That is, the technology sector is an organizational context that is characterized by a heightened awareness of gender equality issues, while its underlying structures remain stubbornly male-dominated.

The relevance of the tricking down of “cultural wars” into tech organizations draws on the preliminary results from a pilot study with 15 Israeli male managers in high-tech corporations who were interviewed about the ethics of gender equality in the workplace. The respondents defined themselves as change agents committed to equality, but they also viewed cultural dynamics as progressing too far. They spoke about the ways these macro cultural dynamics produced inconvenience with workplace constraints, reflected in their perceived lack of freedom and need to be on guard, leading them to compromise their authenticity to maintain political correctness – all in order to not be perceived as immoral, misogynistic, or even violent men. The interviewees perceived political correctness as an important standard, but also as an imposed agenda that has a negative effect on their ability to enjoy work. Revealing a sociological drama characterized by tension between their declared moral commitment to equality and simultaneous sense of moral threat, their responses pointed to the importance of understanding how macro forces were interpreted at the organizational and subjective level.

I will investigate the perceptions and strategies participants use to deal with these cultural countertrends at work and analyze the tensions between ideology and practice as manifested in the organizational day-to-day of established global and local startup technology companies. Specifically, this research will be informed by four main questions:

1. What interpretive schemes, narratives and meanings do the participants apply regarding ethics of gender equality?
2. What kind of cultural-moral imperatives (defined here as established social norms as translated into organizational policies) regarding gender equality are imposed on interviewees in this organizational context? For example, how is political correctness as an imperative perceived, morally and emotionally? How is political correctness translated into daily language and practices? What forms does it take in the two cultural contexts?
3. Are there gender differences in the discourse of justification and legitimation used by interviewees regarding gender equality at work?
4. How are the interviewees’ micro-level conceptions of gender equality translated into the meso-level of organizational mechanisms?

The answers to these questions will contribute to a better understanding of how the discourse on ethics and gender is shaped in different organizational and cultural contexts, and how characteristics of social power and status, including gender, operate vis-à-vis exclusion and inclusion mechanisms in various work environments. Thus, the proposed research will de-transparentize elusive yet enduring forms of gender inequality.

The proposed study draws on and contributes to multiple theories: (a) gender equality ethics in organizations (Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Fotaki and Harding 2017; Pullen and Vachhani 2021; Pullen and Rhodes 2022), (b) cultural sociology of morality (Lamont 1992, 2024; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Tavory 2011; Hitlin and Andersson 2015; Cohen and Dromi 2018), and (c) femininities and masculinities in organizations (Acker 1990, 2006; Martin 2001, 2006; Thomas and Davies 2005; Ridgeway 2011; Knights and Pullen 2019). Together, these frameworks enable an examination of how conceptions, practices, and interactions regarding gender equality at the micro-level are informed by and inform those on the meso- and macro-levels of contemporary organizations. The perceptions of people in positions of power reflect gendered power relations *and* produce gendered power relations. In addition, the analytic perspective of this study will enable deeper theoretical and empirical examination of cultural processes related to the persistence of gender inequality and the stalled gender revolution in contemporary organizations.

***Ethics of Gender Equality in Organizations: From a Normative Approach to a Cultural Sociology of Morality***

Whereas ethics refers to codes of behavior, morality refers more broadly to beliefs about how things should be in human experience. We can therefore treat ethics as an operative dimension and morality as an ideological one in perceptions of justice and fairness (Mostafanezhad and Hannam 2016). This analytical distinction is important given the proposed study’s focus on interpretations of gender equality ethics in the organizational day-to-day, but also on moral imaginings regarding gender equality as shaped by individuals in different cultural and organizational contexts.

Organizations are proud of themselves, argue Pullen and Rhodes (2015). Many continually declare how ethical they are. Ethics and accountability are seen as instruments of moral legitimation, particularly for large corporations. Shareholders pressure boards to increase diversity and equality, particularly in terms of gender (Rose and Bielby 2011). However, despite being well-intended, these pressures often result in depoliticization of social issues and instrumental profit calculations, detracting from the basic goal of ensuring social equality (Guenther 2009; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Pullen and Vachhani 2021).

The conventional organizational literature offers a normative view of ethics, focusing on managerial decision making and corporate social responsibility (Lindgreen and Swaen 2010; Cremer et al. 2010). Conversely, over the past three decades, the Critical Management Studies (CMS) approach has addressed the positioning of individuals as ethical subjects despite organizational conduct, addressing how organizations become contested environments (Rhodes and Wray-Bliss 2013). These two streams, the conventional and critical, express a tension: should ethics be considered an organizational issue or an individual one? (Gherardi 2024). Within the critical stream, an emerging feminist approach rethinks organizational social justice, referring to aspects of care, empathy, and relationality, as well as corporeal ethics. It emphasizes ethics that develop out of difference or social precarity, and experiences of exclusion and marginality (Kenny and Fotaki 2015; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Fotaki and Harding 2017; Pullen and Vachhani 2021; Pullen and Rhodes 2022). These research lenses are particularly significant in broadening the conventional view of equality ethics in organizations, because it represents a feminist alternative to the hegemonic perspective, whereas some consider feminist ethics as niche phenomenon relegated to a “ghetto” of marginal thinkers, mostly women (Pullen and Rhodes 2022; Gherardi 2024).

Judith Butler (1988, 2005a) is one of the major scholars informing CMS regarding the analytical nexus between morality, ethics and gender. Following Foucault, Butler claims that gendered power is related to individuals’ sense of morality and humanity, together with gender norms. The ability to comply with social norms is significant because of the need to become intelligible and to be recognized as a subject. The subjection process follows heterosexual norms (Butler 2005a, 2005b). Subjects therefore find themselves trapped in a web of gender norms to be considered moral. Accordingly, Butler argues that the development of moral subjectivity always involves subordination effects (De Coster and Zanoni 2019).

The proposed study relies on the CMS approach because it offers a feminist sociopolitical perspective on organizational ethics. However, this critical approach retains a normative aspect regarding power and gender equality and remains somewhat suspicious of the morality of the powerful. Therefore, to provide a comprehensive theoretical overview of conceptions of gender equality in organizations, I seek to challenge the dominant normativity assumption in the literature and avoid assessing the degree of morality [or ethical behavior] of the men and women I will interview. Instead, I will delve into the interviewees’ deep story to understand how things feel (Hochschild 2018), how they interpret their positions as managers in today's high-tech organizations, and how they describe and explain their current gendered social reality in their work environment. This reality, in turn, is laden with contradictions when it comes to cultural imperatives and gender equality ethics – what Gabriel Abend (2011) refers to as *thick morality*. I seek a profound understanding of how the interviewees imagine themselves as moral beings, exploring what makes them feel worthy and deconstructing out of their phenomenology the moral pressures they experience.

The theoretical lenses of the cultural sociology of morality enable such an analysis, focusing on moral logics as a kind of cultural toolbox that varies across contexts (Lamont 1992, 2024; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Tavory 2011; Hitlin and Andersson 2015; Cohen and Dromi 2018; Avnoon et al. 2023). This toolbox contains meaning structures or discursive strategies through which we can examine how behaviors are perceived as constrained and enabled (Lamont et al. 2014). These tools enable the researcher to trace discursive representations and interpretations regarding the ethics of gender equality in the current workplace, and different forms of moral self-regulation in that context. For example, Michèle Lamont (1992, 2000) compared perceptions of moral worth among individuals from the upper-middle and working classes in France and the U.S., examining how they were shaped by cultural repertoires and symbolic boundaries, and how these discursive boundaries created the conditions for the creation of social boundaries. This type of sociological investigation is particularly needed in the current unsettled times in Israel and the U.S.

As a rule, in the cultural sociology of morality, the reference to gender as a moral question that varies across contexts has been neglected. Little is known about organizational and cultural differences in the gendered moral positioning of women and men at the workplace. The present study seeks to narrow this gap in the literature through the analytic combination (of X) with the body of knowledge on femininities and masculinities in organizations.

Informed by these analytical lenses, in a previous study on the phenomenology of power among women officers in the Israeli military, I showed how they constituted themselves as moral agents in the face of the delegitimization of their power as women in a hyper-masculine organization. They achieved this by employing meaning structures such as moral boundary-work and self-positioning as authentic subjects in contrast to male colleagues and commanders within the military organization (Karazi-Presler 2021). These discursive tools took shape within the military’s logic and normative gender repertoire as an extremely gendered organization. The current research builds on these findings and seeks to expand them through a comparative analytical examination of different cultural and organizational contexts.  
***Femininities and Masculinities in Organizations: Making Sense of Unsettled Times***

In examining ethics of gender equality in different organizational and cultural contexts, the present study contributes to the extensive literature on gender and organizations. The literature indicates an enduring gender inequality in access to material resources (Ridgeway 2011) and structural obstacles to promotion (Acker 1990; Ridgeway 2011; Calás et al. 2014; Bell and Sinclair 2016). A key finding that arises from this literature is that when women hold power, they experience a dilemma: unlike men, when they adopt behaviors associated with direct and confident leadership, they attract derogatory responses (Kanter 1977; Foschi 1996; Correll et al. 2020) that focus on their (lack of) sexuality, body, and private life (Karazi-Presler 2021; Kenny and Fanchini 2023). Accordingly, women’s experience is often described using metaphors such as “labyrinth” (Carli 2001; Eagly and Carli 2007).

Over the past three decades, the study of gender and organizations has followed two main and interrelated directions: intersectionality and women’s agency. Regarding *intersectionality* (e.g. Crenshaw 1991; Fenstermaker and West 2002), a prevailing assumption has been that women’s power is not stable, but varies across social groups and sociocultural and organizational contexts (Acker 2006; Turco 2010; Hamilton et al. 2019). The theoretical emphasis on the complexity of inequality regimes provides important insights into the relation between gender and power in organizations, because it allows us to study social power in terms of oppression and control, but also in terms of the scopes of action available to women by virtue of their sociocultural positioning both within and outside the organization.

Concerning *agency*, the literature focuses on women’s ability to exert power within gendered organizational structures. This literature derives from the feminist opposition to viewing women only as victims and claims that women can resist the organizational gender order, if only locally and pragmatically (Martin 2001, 2006; Thomas and Davies 2005; Karazi-Presler 2020, 2022). Organizational power positions are often viewed as emancipatory, contributing to women’s ability to resist the gender order. Breaching the glass ceiling contributes to women’s ability to serve as change agents in organizational environments (Stainback et al. 2016). Ironically, however, many studies suggest that women who reach the top of the organization are subjected to even greater pressures to adjust to its gendered culture (van den Brink and Benschop 2012; Stainback et al. 2016; Karazi-Presler and Wasserman 2022) and that such advancement isolates women, exposing them further to gendered practices, such as sexual harassment (Stainback et al. 2011, 2016; McLaughlin et al. 2012).

More specifically, studies on femininities in organizations address the way gendered power is exercised against women and how they navigate the gendered organizational labyrinth (Sotirin and Gottfried 1999; Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004; Denissen and Saguy 2014). Little is known, however, about the way women cope with the translation of cultural countertrends regarding gender into the micro- and meso-organizational levels. For example, what happens when the perceived male dominance changes in work environments? How do women perceive the imperative of political correctness and diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and how do such initiatives affect their daily gendered practices and the construction of femininities at work?

As part of the focus on intersectionality and agency, much of the literature on gender and organizations has focused on women and femininity. Research on masculinities in the contemporary workplace exists but these studies are less significant in terms of their impact on the study of gender and organizations. The proposed research seeks to provide a more complete theoretical and empirical landscape of gender equality in organizations in taking a comparative perspective on femininities and masculinities. Also, as we shall see, the contemporary masculinity drama is intriguing in itself.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity emphasizes the importance of culture in reproducing gender inequality. Raewyn Connell (1995) argued that cultural values, beliefs and practices all serve to reinforce the idea that men are entitled to wealth, strength and power – “the patriarchal dividend.” Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity inspired the organizational body of knowledge on how men “do masculinity” in various organizational contexts, whether dominated by men or women (e.g. Dellinger 2004; Hinojosa 2010; Simpson 2011). In this literature, men are frequently portrayed as obstructing women’s progress and affecting their sense of worth (Cockburn 1991; Martin 2006; Prime and Moss-Racusin 2009; Pullen and Simpson 2009; McKinsey&Company 2012; Ely and Kimmel 2018). Studies reveal how men perceive a need to respond to social norms and pressures in ways that push them toward behaviors considered “bad but bold” (Glick et al. 2004), or quite simply toxic, including sexual harassment (McLaughlin et al. 2012; Bonnes 2022), physical aggressiveness (Woodward and Neil Jenkings 2011), competitiveness, and overwork (Cooper 2014).

Even today, the hegemonic cultural premise is that men are entitled to power. Nevertheless, this premise varies across class, racial and ethnic positioning and is certainly not absolute. As a social status, masculinity is still perceived to be unstable, difficult to attain and easy to lose, requiring constant construction through daily symbolic struggles (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Wingfield 2009; Carbado et al. 2013). In recent decades, masculinity has been increasingly associated with transition, crisis, struggle, loss and a need for rehabilitation, and studies often focus on its precarity (Berdahl et al. 2018; Hammer 2023; Khanna and Meadow 2023). This precarity is due to the loss of men’s (nearly exclusive) status as breadwinners, undermining their traditional gender dominance especially in the work force and denying their cultural entitlement (Knights and Pullen 2019). Moreover, emerging feminist movements such as #MeToo, cancel culture, and political correctness imperatives have made many men feel anxious and unable to meet ethical standards of gender equality at work, with the potential loss of accompanying material and moral symbolic resources (Hammer 2023).

The resulting backlash ideology views men as victims of feminism. For the populist right wing, the precarity of masculinity serves as a moral justification for expressing a longing to a mythical, male-dominated past, and re-legitimizing traits such as aggressiveness and physical strength. This longing echoes strongly among working class men, who struggle for a sense of self-dignity on a daily basis (Lamont et al. 2017; DiMuccio and Knowles 2023; Schwarz 2023). In contrast, in the lives of middle-to-upper-class men – including those examined in the pilot study – hegemonic and pro-feminist masculinities appear to “sit alongside one another” (Hunter et al. 2017). However, it is unclear how the current cultural forces affect their organizational day-to-day.

Due to the dichotomic focus on men as entitled to or losing power, another research lacuna addressed in the proposed study relates to the ways men perceive themselves to be social change agents. The proposed comparative examination of powerful men and women who espouse egalitarian ethics will enable identification of a variety of subjective interpretations and representations of gender equality, highlighting competing discourses of masculinities and femininities. Drawing on these multiple literatures in ways that extend their relevance to the overarching research questions here, this study will investigate the strategies participants use to deal with macro-cultural countertrends at work and analyze the tensions between ideology and practice and how they are manifested by those with managerial power.

1. **Research Objectives & Expected Significance**

The study has three interrelated objectives derived from the literature review and insights gained from pilot interviews. *The first objective* is understanding how the glocal socio-political clashes around gender manifest in the workplace. Specifically, the proposed study will analyze how contemporary *unsettled times* are articulated in the everyday life of organizations through emerging subjective prism of women and men in management positions in high-tech. In terms of *expected significance*, the proposed study will broaden our knowledge about the intersubjective effects of cultural processes that permeate organizations. This approach will contribute to a deep understanding of the fabric of individuals’ perceptions, interpretations, and translations of cultural countertrends in everyday organizational life.

Furthermore, organizations are part of the local and global culture. Culture flows into organizations, and organizations shape the broader culture. Thus, this study will examine the relations between symbolic structures, actions, and interactions at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of work environments as participants in power both express and produce power relations. Integrating these levels of analysis will increase our understanding of how organizations both reproduce and serve as agents of gender inequality.

*The second objective* is to explore the relations between gender equality and ethics through subjective perceptions; discursive strategies of legitimation; the context in which they are enacted; the cultural tools and interpretative frames they offer; and their underlying concepts of self and social relations. The proposed study will investigate the junctures of these perceptions in two cultural contexts to explore the unique translations of the glocal cultural clash. The objective is to analyze how individuals interpret organizational reality in order to act strategically at the intersection of official ethical imperatives regarding gender equality and profoundly rooted gender inequalities. In terms of *expected significance*, this will contribute to the sociology of gender in organizations by understanding how people constitute themselves as moral subjects across different spheres of action and social positions. Combining the analytical lenses of the cultural sociology of morality, the study will examine participants’ use of discursive strategies, symbolic boundaries, and categorization systems, and thus reveal each organization’s cultural pressures, risks and anxieties. The study will further contribute to understanding what allows powerful women and men to feel morally worthy and what threatens their moral worth in today’s presumed egalitarian tech environments. In that, the study will also contribute to the cultural sociology of morality, by addressing gender at work analytically as a moral question that varies with the cultural and organizational context.

*The third objective* is to analyze contemporary constructions of femininities and masculinities through the focus on the significance of unsettled times. In terms of *expected significance*, this will contribute to theoretical knowledge regarding femininities and masculinities in organizations, and thereby to the broad sociological literature on gender and organizations. The study of constructions of femininities in organizations focuses on the survival and navigation strategies of women in power positions in gendered organizations but neglects the way they interpret and cope with cultural changes with regard to the ethics of gender equality in organizations. Furthermore, the focus on perceptions of gender equality among men in power currently perceived as experiencing a cultural crisis adds to contemporary theory and emerging critical research on masculinities at work.

**Organizational and Cultural Contexts: High-Tech Organizations in the US and Israel**

Over the past two decades, the high-tech industry has become the most lucrative worldwide (Neely et al. 2023). Careers in tech are considered ideal in the new economy. Culturally, this industry seeks to emphasize its uniqueness compared to past employment practices, promoting an image of being open, informal, and non-authoritarian. However, in-depth examination of the tech industry reveals familiar patterns of social hierarchy and exclusion )Neely et al. 2023; Correll 2017(. This contradiction between ideals and reality is the primary reason why I refer to the organizational gender regime in high-tech as *ambivalent*.

In global high-tech corporations, technological savvy and skills are constitutive elements of male identities. There is a strong symbolic and embodied relationship between hegemonic masculinity and modern technology (MellstrÖm 2004; Kelan 2007), with both identified with rationality, power and control (Faulkner 2001). Indeed, studies of gender inequality in STEM areas have documented a persistent organizational-cultural climate that excludes women. Despite a recent increase in the number of women, the industry has remained essentially masculine (Rhodes et al. 2018). Consequently, many women who enter STEM fields ultimately leave them, in what is referred to as the “leaky pipeline” (Blickenstaff 2005; Alfrey and Twine 2017; Neely et al. 2023; Alegria and Banerjee 2024).

Moreover, the masculine climate in the tech industry is characterized by a “geeky” subculture that also serves as a regime of inequality (Acker 2006). The terms “geek” and “nerd” are culturally identified with masculine appearance, traits, and leisure activities (Alfrey and Twine 2017). These terms used to be insults directed at intelligent people with a predilection for computer games who lack social skills. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg is a prime example. Like him, geeky men are currently considered cultural role models in the industry, and a source of symbolic capital sought by women. According to Alfrey and Twine (2017), women in the industry feel that their professional competence is often measured by their embodied geekiness, which includes not only technical skills but also personality traits, cultural knowledge, and gender blurring. These authors show that geeky performance enables White and Asian-American, but not African American women, to feel accepted by male colleagues in tech environments.

Consequently, it may be claimed that geek culture is not only gendered but racialized – as famously characterized by Caroline Cariado-Perez (2021, p. 94), “If Silicon Valley meritocracy is religion, its God is a white male Harvard dropout, and so are most of its disciples.” In other words, high-tech companies are still dominated by a “bro” culture, and their image of the ideal worker is a privileged White man (MellstrÖm 2004; Selwyn 2007; Frenkel 2008; Issac 2017; Berdahl et al. 2018; Reid et al. 2018; Alegria 2019; Yu Chow 2024). Similarly, the not-quite geeky image associated with cultural icons such as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos suggests a sense of masculine entitlement that borders on sheer irresponsibility in which White young and energetic masculinity is maintained to the point of utter egoism, and a thin new-age veneer that conceals neoliberal if not Fordist logics (Surowiecki 2014).

The proposed comparative analysis is justified in that the cultural global forces currently shaping masculinities and femininities in workspaces affect the two cultures differentially. Israel’s economy is often referred to as the new Silicon Valley, and the country prides itself for being the “Start-Up Nation” (Maggor and Frenkel 2022). The Israeli high-tech industry is umbilically attached to its American counterpart. One unique local characteristic, however, is that the Israeli military (a hyper-masculine organization in its own right) has a critical impact on employees’ ability to attain positions of power in the industry and affects its masculine culture. Elite technological units such as the IDF’s prestigious military software center, MAMRAM (Breznitz 2005) or the military intelligence Unit 8200 were particularly central to this process. The high-tech culture in Israel is often regarded as less politically correct than that in the United States (Shamir and Melnik 2002). Therefore, the comparison between Israel and the U.S. regarding the ethics of gender equality is crucial as it allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural differences shape attitudes toward ethics of gender equality and the implementation of ethical practices in the workplace. Analyzing these distinctions will provide insights into the unique challenges faced by women and men in the tech industry in both countries, highlighting the impact of social norms and organizational policies on gender dynamics.

In the US high-tech industry, women make up only 20% of executive, senior, and managerial positions (EEOC 2016). In 2014, in response to public pressure, leading firms such as Google and Facebook began to disclose workforce demographics alongside pledges to do better. The largest gain has been in Facebook: from 15% to 25% women in technical jobs from 2014 to 2021 (Harrison 2019). Most of this increase is among White women. White workers in Silicon Valley firms still hold 83% of power positions (Neely et al. 2023). In addition, women in US high-tech still earn around 10-20% less than do men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024).

The rate of women employed in the Israeli high-tech industry is relatively low, particularly in managerial positions: women represent only 22.6% of management members, and less than 10% of managers heading startups (Soroker and Nayar 2022). The high-tech wage gap is also significant: around 20% (Central Bureau of Statistics 2024). Various national programs are in place to increase participation in the industry by diverse populations, particularly ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs (National Committee on Increasing Human Capital in High-Tech, 2022). Nevertheless, overall, it remains a Jewish, secular, masculine and young environment (Wasserman and Frenkel 2020), with an organizational culture of long working hours and high employee commitment and availability.

The low representation of diverse populations in high-tech, including women, reveals the depth of the inequality regimes operating within this industry. Yet, compared to other sectors in the labor market, it is widely perceived as committed to equality and diversity. Global high-tech giants are often seen as leading the labor market in terms of social diversity and gender equality, despite the fact that their diversity and inclusion policies are often motivated by instrumental considerations (Rose and Bielby 2011; Alfrey 2022). The gap between the declared commitment to diversity and the actual gender and racial exclusion in high-tech in both the US and Israel suggests that the global high-tech industry is an important site for the examination of contemporary gender meanings and practices. This cultural backdrop is shaped by the recent conservative backlash in the US and the extreme rightwing government in Israel, which actively promotes the exclusion of women and other marginalized groups.

1. **Detailed Description of the Proposed Research**

**Research Design and Methods**

***Feminist Qualitative Epistemology and Methodology***

The decision to rely primarily on in-depth interviews is informed by two closely related approaches – the phenomenological-interpretive and the feminist (Harding 1988, 2012; Reed 2011) – given their shared emphasis on how knowledge sources are formulated from within a subjective daily consciousness. In view of the epistemic conceptions grounding this study and given its objectives, in-depth interviews are the most appropriate research tool. As suggested by Lamont and Swidler (2014), interviews allow an examination of “Where people live imaginatively—morally but also in terms of their sense of identity – what allows them to experience themselves as good, valuable, worthwhile people” (p. 159).

Moreover, Lamont and Swidler (2014) believe that in-depth interviews are the most suitable tool for comparative sociological research, since they enable systematic attention to the research design, to situations, contexts and types of individuals. They allow the researcher to trace emotions, including social risks, anxieties and pressures occurring in various cultural contexts, as well as to understand the pieces of each culture used by subjects in their day-to-day experiences (Pugh 2013; Tavory 2020; Lareau 2021; Small and Calarco 2022). Interpreting in-depth interviews will enable a mapping of tensions in the participants’ social world regarding their morality and ethics. The attributes of in-depth interviewing persist even over Zoom, which from my past experience can be a space for establishing trust, intimacy and a sense of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees (Archibald et al. 2019; Oliffe et al. 2021).

***Ethical Considerations***

The interviews will be conducted with the consent of the participants and their organizations, and subject to a commitment to blur all identifying details. The research will undergo review by both Bar-Ilan's institutional ethics committees and will adhere to the guidelines of the TCPS 2 (Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans) following the completion of ethics training for students and faculty. Participants will provide informed consent by signing an online consent form, as the interviews will be conducted via Zoom. All research materials will remain confidential and will be accessible only to the principal investigator and authorized research assistants. No materials will be shared in their entirety or distributed via email. All raw and coded data will be securely stored on the university’s server, protected by password encryption.

***Interview Participants***

In-depth interviews will be conducted with 30 women and 30 men in each cultural context, Israel and the US (120 interviews in total). All interviewees will be in mid-management positions in a variety of technical, training, and HR roles. In each country, I will focus on established global giants such as Google and Meta and on startups, based on the assumption that the (formal) regulation of gender equality is stricter in large multinational, whereas the organizational imperatives are similar in both small and large organization, as found in the pilot. Each interview will take between 90 and 180 minutes to complete. Interviews with US workers will be conducted via Zoom; interviews with Israeli workers will be conducted via Zoom to ensure consistency with the American context.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Local Startup Organizations | Established Global Organizations |
| Israeli Men (*n* ~ 30) | All interviewees will be in mid-management positions in technical, training or human resources roles within their organization. | All interviewees will be in mid-management positions in technical, training or human resources roles within their organization. |
| Israeli Women (*n* ~ 30) |
| American Men (*n* ~ 30) |
| American Women (*n* ~ 30) |

*Note*. Mid-management positions include roles where the interviewee has direct managerial responsibility for some number of employees in a subordinate position, but who themselves are subordinate to others in the organization.

***Recruitment and Sampling***

The sample of interviewees will ideally straddle the structural seam between the national-local and the global fields. Thus, individuals in power positions within this sector are (or should be) aware of the global ethics of equality and local counter-movements, requiring them to translate abstract social ethics into daily practices in a way that may diverge from formal ethics. The relation between the interviewee and the cultural discourse on gender is shaped differently in various organizational and cultural contexts, so the comparative perspective at the core of the proposed study will enable identification of the interpretive toolbox adopted by the interviewees. Middle managers are interesting as loci of structural strains because of their position as intermediaries between hierarchical levels and because–in some cases– they exhibit a mixed commitment to both professional and managerial orientations (Bresnen et al. 2019; Azambuja et al. 2023). Therefore, the choice to interview mid-level managers is derived from the need to examine how organizational policy is mediated and translated into daily practices (Gjerde and Alvesson 2020; Azambuja et al. 2023).

The current research design refers to the gender categories that guide the selection of participants, combined with an intersectional approach (Windsong 2016; McCall 2005). Participants will be selected using several anchors during the recruitment stage, using snowball and purposeful sampling based on a preliminary analysis. The inclusion criteria include (a) gender, (b) rank, (c) organizational context (startup vs. established) and (d) cultural context (i.e., Israel and U.S.). I will recruit candidates through messages posted on social media groups and glocal internet discussion forums dedicated to high-tech employees (such as LinkedIn). In itself, as it is based on social circles, the snowball sample can be indicative of inequality regimes. Nevertheless, should the sample be homogeneous, and I will identify an analytical need to access interviewees from a variety of racial and ethnoclass positions, I will also use purposeful sampling.

***Interview Instrument***

A preliminary semi-structured interviews has been pilot tested with men in Israeli high-tech organizations. Introductory questions allow interviewees to get comfortable speaking about themselves by focusing on individual personal and career development. The interviewee is then asked about their conceptions of people in positions of power and conceptions of an “ideal” manager. The idea of gender is introduced by probing whether the “ideal” varies for male vs. female managers. Interviewees are then asked about self-conceptions as managers, which is facilitated by asking them to compare/contrast themselves with colleagues. The interview then moves to workplace dilemmas and moral dilemmas. Interviewees are asked about challenges, stressors, vulnerabilities, and emotional expression in the workplace. The topic of sense of belongingness is addressed by focusing on various situations of security and insecurity at work.

If issues of gender have not been spontaneously mentioned by this point of the interview, a set of specific questions address the role of gender power relations and their effects on one professionally and how they affect the day-to-day workplace. Interviewees are asked if their behavior and/or belief systems differ at work vs. outside of work. With this context established, interviewees are prompted to reflect on how they are perceived by both subordinates and colleagues in this respect. Interviewees are asked to describe firsthand examples of discriminatory practices against both men and women. A final set of questions focuses on working with men and women, views about men and women who are in positions of power, and self-perceptions about gender, masculinity/femininity, and how these concepts are at play in the workplace.

Specific topics will likely emerge inductively based on the questions. However, if ideas such as political correctness, organizational DEI initiatives, gender pronouns, or gendered practices have not been addressed directly, follow-up questions will be inserted to ensure coverage of these key concepts. Finally, in addition to research design concerns, it is essential to address intersectionality in the interview as well. Therefore, the interview guide includes questions that refer to gender, race, and ethnoclass aspects in various stages of the interview (Windsong 2016; McCall 2005). The interview guide is based on the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological core assumptions and the objectives of this research.

As a qualitative researcher, I am always open to the unknown, and anticipate inductive revelations not considered during the planning of this research (Small and Calarco 2022). Accordingly, after transcribing about fifteen pilot interviews in each context, I will conduct a preliminary analysis that will enable me to identify tentative themes to be examined more deeply in subsequent interviews. Moreover, as part of the abductive reasoning guiding this study (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2022), I will document all interview occurrences and maintain meticulous fieldnotes. These practices will serve to create a robust and “thick” database that will support the process of discovering analytical “surprises” and innovative reasoning.

**Planned Analyses**

I will use MAXQDA software in analyzing the interviews, transcripts, and fieldnotes. The analytic process will include preliminary open coding, and advanced, more focused coding (Lareau 2021; Timmermans and Tavory 2022). The entire process will be accompanied by consistent writing of analytic memos, enabling me to present a rich comparative analysis of perceptions of gender equality ethics.

**Preliminary Results**

*I feel we are in a kind of rearguard action. If a woman enters the room, everyone takes a few steps back. They look at her and tell themselves, I’m a man in today’s world. I no longer belong in the old world. I must behave differently, especially in our worlds, which are more masculine – engineering, technology. A woman enters, and immediately you start wondering, where did she come from, what’s her story? She must have been admitted on the basis of affirmative action, and then you tell yourself, don’t think that way. Careful, “shut the fuck up” {in English}, keep those thoughts down, so that you don’t reveal anything from your automatic frame of mind.* (Yossi, manager in an Israeli startup company)

In 2022-2024, I conducted 15 in-depth interviews with mid-level managers in the Israeli high-tech industry. Based on the analysis of these interviews, I propose a new theoretical concept – *inconvenience* – as a moral structure in gendered organizations. These men sought to differentiate themselves from moral stigmas liable to cling to them as misogynist or even violent men and position themselves as agents of social change. At the same time, they pointed to the progress of contemporary cultural dynamics and institutional arrangements regarding gender equality at work, which they felt have gone too far.

Specifically, *inconvenience* served as a significant element in the translation of political correctness into the organizational day-to-day, focused on the inability of those men to feel authentic at work. For the interviewees, inconvenience involved restrictions on physical closeness, reference to women’s body or appearance, expressions of intimacy or sexuality, and humor. Therefore, many adopted daily strategies of self-restraint, self-censorship, and emotional management.

In a previous study, I found that professional women applied strategies of emotional and physical restraint so as not to tarnish their professional value and not to be identified with feminine stereotypes (Karazi-Presler 2024). What is compelling in the pilot results, however, is that the male interviewees focused on their moral positioning regardless of their professionalism, because their anxiety was that they would lose their career and be publicly exposed as immoral. They felt vulnerable in these unsettled cultural times and constantly in need of adaptation.

The comparison to women is significant because it appears that men do not have to contend with issues regarding their professional worth, which both they and others often assume to be inherent. Moreover, culturally speaking, being moral to them means losing their authenticity as subjects )Schwarz 2013, 2016, 2019; Karazi-Presler 2021). Indeed, being inauthentic at work was difficult for them, not only because of the restraint it involved, but also because they felt that it meant violating a broad cultural imperative of authenticity as a moral subject.

These men’s sense of *inconvenience* thus sheds light on cultural norms, moral-emotional pressures, and tensions in their perceptions of gender equality. Specifically, the interviewees’ perceptions reveal an intriguing tension between their self-descriptions as equality or change agents and the moral vulnerability they constantly experience of being classified as agents of inequality. This tension, so central to a contemporary glocal sociological drama that needs to be decipher, sheds light on the way men view themselves as subjects in today’s world of work and has significant implications for our understanding of contemporary gender inequality.

**Researcher Resources**

I am an experienced interviewer and expert in the relevant theoretical and methodological fields, gender and sexuality in organizations, qualitative feminist methodology, and sociology of culture (Karazi-Presler 2020; 2021; 2024; Karazi-Presler and Wasserman 2022). I have experience examining the phenomenon of gendered power in various organizational spheres in Israel and the US. During my postdoctoral studies at Harvard, I established connections with prominent Silicon Valley and Boston high-tech corporations, including Salesforce and Google, and key personnel who can facilitate connections with potential interviewees. I have considerable experience in conducting in-depth interviews via Zoom with respondents in the United States and Israel. Also, I have experience with using the MAXQDA software (e.g., Karazi-Presler 2021; Karazi-Presler and Wasserman 2022; Karazi-Presler 2024). I have established additional contacts with potential interviewees. Moreover, I have already contacted the HR departments of two high-tech corporations, explained the purpose of this research, and received their basic approval for participation. With respect to personnel, two potential students (MA and PhD) have indicated an interest in serving as research assistants in the study. The PhD student is networked in the high-tech industry and can facilitate connections with potential interviewees.

**Expected Results and Pitfalls**

As a feminist sociologist studying men who, according to the pilot findings, find it difficult to cope with gender issues in these unsettled times, and seeking to decipher the sense of vulnerability by men and women in a privileged environment, I face a significant epistemic-ideological challenge. In the proposed study, I choose to suspend my critical judgement and delve into the interviewees’ deep story. In doing so, I adopt Arlie Hochschild's (2018) approach in her study of the American right, to suspend judgements and study the interviewees’ narratives as felt. My basic assumption is that the way men and women perceive themselves in organizational environments has significant implications for the understanding of gender equality in today’s organizations, since these perceptions reveal tensions that facilitate and obstruct social change.

I expect the proposed study to make novel conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions to the contemporary sociological body of knowledge of gender and organizations. This research will contribute to the cultural sociology of morality by addressing gender at work analytically as a moral question that varies with the cultural and organizational context.

Through the analytical lens of the cultural sociology of morality, my interviews with high-tech managers will reveal each organization’s cultural pressures, risks and anxieties. The study will inform our understanding the ways that women and men in positions of power feel morally worthy and what threatens their moral worth in workplace environments that publicize egalitarian ethics but remain male-dominated. The findings will add to our knowledge about how perceptions, interpretations, and translations of cultural countertrends permeate everyday organizational life. Importantly, the proposed research will help reveal the tensions that hinder and promote social change at work.

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