**Power, Gender, and Ethics in Postliberal Israel: Experiences of Mid-Level Managers in Academia and High-Tech**

# **Scientific Abstract**

The current postliberal age is characterized by a glocal backlash against liberal democracy and ubiquitous identity-politics struggles. In these struggles, major global cultural forces are at work regarding gender and social power, particularly in the aftermath of #MeToo. One is the product of Trumpian nationalist conservatism that constructs an extreme version of machismo masculinity. This is countered by the feminist critique of the permanence of gender identities and hegemonic views of gender and sexualities.

The proposed study will examine how these macro-social tensions are articulated at the organizational level. Specifically, this research will explore how they are interpreted by mid-level managers in two major sectors in the Israeli economy: academia and high-tech. It will ask: Which cultural narratives do managers adopt into their perceptions of power, and how are these related to their phenomenology of power? Which interpretive schemes do men and women in power positions apply to power in the different organizational contexts? How do they construct power today, and how do they justify their constructions?

The two contexts of academia and high-tech are characterized by moral imperatives and organizational arrangements that support social equality. In practice, however, masculine norms and inequality regimes persist in both. The difference between them is that whereas in higher education the equality ethics is seen as inherent and informed by the enlightenment traditions, in the high-tech industry this ethics is perceived as imported, part of an instrumental discourse of corporate responsibility. Note, however, that both operate according to neoliberal imperatives. They are also similar in straddling the structural seam between the national-local and global fields. Accordingly, powerful subjects within them operate interchangeably in both fields, complying with the global ethics of equality, while being simultaneously aware of glocal countertrends as they translate formal ethics into daily practices. The comparative perspective of the proposed study enables us to identify the organizational interpretive toolbox regarding gendered power. In other words, my premise is that the relationship between the subject and cultural discourse regarding gendered power is shaped differently in different cultural-organizational contexts.

The proposed study seeks to meet two major theoretical lacunas. The literature on ethics and gender in organizations, and particularly in critical management studies (CMS), usually addressed ethics from the critical feminist perspective. Despite its importance as an alternative to moral hegemonic organizational practices, this approach offers judgmental standards for what is deemed moral or ethical and an expansion of conceptions of justice and morality in organizations. In this study, I seek to avoid judgement regarding questions of morality, ethics, and power. Instead, I seek to understand how subjects interpret their power. Relying on the theoretical lenses of cultural sociology of morality, I will describe the way intersubjective cultural meaning structures – ideologies, legitimate language, scripts, and narratives – affect and limit contemporary views and justifications of gendered power in the organization. I seek to understand how subjects imagine their lives in terms of morality and sense of identity, and what makes them feel worthy, and deconstruct out of their phenomenology of power which cultural pressures they experience in each organizational context.

The second lacuna is related to the phenomenology of gendered power, an aspect neglected in the literature on gender and power in organizations. By comparing the phenomenology of power of men and women in the organization, the proposed research addresses this lacuna. Combined with the comparison between different organizational contexts, the gender comparison is particularly important in order to understand how the discourse of power and gender is differentially shaped – how characteristics of power and status (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) operate differently vis-à-vis exclusion and inclusion mechanisms in different work environments. Thus, the comparative sociological perspectives enable to de-transparentize various elusive but enduring forms of gender inequality. The unique theoretical combination offered here between the (gender) equality ethics, cultural sociology of morality, and gendered power in organizations will enable an exploration of the interaction between micro-level perspectives and practices and the meso and macro level gender inequality in today’s organizations.

In examining these issues, the proposed study will use qualitative and inductive research methods, that will reveal the perceptions and categorization systems of power among subjects. In-depth interviews will be conducted with 120 mid-level managers of both genders in academia and high-tech corporations. In addition, the study will be informed by an analysis of organizational documents. I expect the proposed study to make a major conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contribution to contemporary sociological discussions of gendered power in organizations, and to play an innovative role in the contemporary sociological research on gender and organizations.

**Research Program**

**Scientific Background**

The proposed study offers a comparative sociological analysis of subjects’ conceptions of power by men and women in power positions in academic and high-tech organizations. Ours is a critical cultural-historical juncture characterized by constant struggles and ideological polarization regarding issues of power, equality, and gender. In this juncture, 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). These struggles make the questions examined in the proposed research particularly timely in both the global and local context.

Currently, in what some refer to as the *postliberal age*, the ethics of social equality (together with other conceptions of human rights civil liberties) are under an unprecedented attack (Deneen 2019; Nelson 2019). Many countries worldwide, including the US, Russia, Hungary, Poland, and Israel, are currently experiencing a popular and governmental reaction to the universal ideologies of equality (Revers 2023). In post- or illiberal populist regimes (as in Hungary and Poland), the politics of gender equality functions as a unifying symbol of all that is seen as problematic in the liberal regime. 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 US, these cultural clashes culminated with the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016. Trump sought to reconstitute the traditional social order, including a machismo version of masculinity (Ferree 2001; Hochschild 2018; Dignam and Rohlinger 2019; Schwarz 2023). Another high point in this struggle was reached in 2023, when the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion and ended affirmative action in college admissions (Lamont 2023). These social processes are also evident in Israel, where an extreme rightwing coalition has adopted an explicitly antiliberal and anti-genderism agenda (Frenkel 2023; Herzberg-Druker 2023). For example, with the establishment of this rightwing government, women were pushed out of the top managements of state organizations (Dori 2023).

These political attacks on social equality demand an empirical examination of their trickling down into organizational life, given that organizations are major contexts for where cultural meanings are shaped and materialize (Swidler 2023). Accordingly, the proposed study offers a comparative examination of conceptions of gendered power among women and men in two contexts viewed as characterized by an egalitarian ethics: academia and high-tech. In doing so, I seek to meet two major lacunas in literature. In studies on gender and organizations, particularly critical management studies (CMS), ethics and morality are usually addressed from a feminist perspective, which is important in presenting alternatives to hegemonic masculine practices (Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Fotaki and Harding 2017; Pullen and Vachhani 2021). This perspective is lacking, however, in that it offers strict standards regarding organizational morality. In the proposed study, I intend to suspend judgement regarding the morality of power and avoid any evaluation of the morality of the participants practices. Instead, I seek to understand how they interpret their power. Relying on the theoretical lenses of cultural sociology of morality, I seek to address this lacuna and deal with the way intersubjective cultural structures of meaning (ideologies, legitimate language, scripts, narratives, repertoires, and symbolic boundaries) affect and limit contemporary conceptualizations and justifications of gendered power in organizational environments (Lamont 2012, 2019, n.d.; Lamont et al. 2014).

Specifically, I will ask: Which cultural narratives do people adopt into their power conceptions, and how do these relate to their phenomenologies of power? To answer this question, I will examine, for example, the subjective meanings associated with political correctness in the phenomenology of power in the different organizational contexts. Political correctness is one of the major social structures that serve as objects of moral panic on the part of conservatives worldwide. Its criticism and denigration have grown out of the public denunciation of those failing to meet its imperatives by not complying with self-censorship and acting subject to emotional rules that contradict other moral imperatives such as authenticity and emotional expressiveness (Hochschild 2018; Schwarz 2023). Nevertheless, even though political correctness is a major cultural and moral power structure, its theoretical and empirical meaning remains unclear in contemporary conceptualizations of power and gender in organizations, and little is known about its role in the experience of subjects in the organizational day-to-day.

The proposed study seeks to meet another lacuna in the literature on gender and power in organization by examining the phenomenology of gendered power, an aspect neglected by the literature and partly addressed in my previous studies (Karazi-Presler 2021; Karazi-Presler and Wasserman 2022). It will do so particularly by expanding the research gaze to include the power phenomenology of men in different organizational environments. The comparative analysis of men’s and women’s phenomenology of power will enable an exploration of each organizational field from certain analytical angles that could shed light on new analytic angles in the other field. This comparison is particularly important to understand how the discourse on power and gender is shaped differently in each organizational context; and how characteristics of power and status (gender, class, ethnicity, religion, etc.) operate differently vis-à-vis exclusion and inclusion mechanisms in different work environments. Thus, the comparative sociological perspective of the proposed research will shed light on various elusive, yet enduring forms of gender inequality and de-transparentize them.

The theoretical combination of the lenses of (gender) equality ethics in organizations, cultural sociology of morality, and gendered power in organizations, as offered in the proposed study, will enable to examine how conceptions, practices, and interactions regarding power in the micro level are informed by and inform those on the meso and macro levels of contemporary organizations. The conceptions of subjects in power express power relations and produce gendered power relations in the various spaces by themselves. At the same time, interpretations of power serve as an analytic link connecting the various analytic levels in this study. Finally, 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.

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

Organizations are proud of themselves, argue Pullen and Rhodes (2015). Many are constantly busy declaring how ethical they are. Nowadays, ethics and accountability are seen as instruments of moral legitimation, particularly for large corporations. Shareholders pressure corporate boards to increase diversity, equality, and inclusion, particularly in terms of gender (Rose and Bielby 2011). Scholars argue that despite the good intentions behind those pressures, they often result in depoliticization of social issues, impersonality, and instrumental profit calculations. In that, shareholders detract from the basic goal of ensuring social equality in the organization (Guenther 2009; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Pullen and Vachhani 2021).

The conventional organizational literature offers a normative view of ethics, and therefore addresses ethical standards for organizations and the ethics of individuals in the organization, focusing on managerial decision making, and corporate social responsibility (Lindgreen and Swaen 2010; Cremer et al. 2010). Conversely, over the past three decades and more, the critical management studies (CMS) approach has addressed the positioning of individuals as ethical subjects despite organizational conduct, addressing the question of how organizations become contested environments due to competing ethical ideologies (Rhodes and Wray-Bliss 2013). Within this critical current, an emerging feminist ethics approach rethinks organizational social justice. This woman-centered approach refers to aspects of care, empathy, and relationality, as well as corporeal ethics. It emphasizes ethics that develops out of difference and alterity, or out of political precarity and experiences of exclusion and marginality (Kenny and Fotaki 2015; Pullen and Rhodes 2015; Fotaki and Harding 2017; Pullen and Vachhani 2021).

These research lenses are particularly important in expanding the conventional view of ethics of gender equality in organizations. This is mainly because they represent a feminist alternative to the hegemonic gendered perspective of ethics in organizations, one that includes bodily, affective, and emotional aspects. However, this approach is still normative with regard to power and gender equality. In addition, it appears to be inherently suspicious of the morality of the powerful.

Conversely, in this study I seek to avoid a judgmental position about questions of ethics and power, nor am I interested in determining whether the interviewees’ practices are ethical. Instead, I would like to understand how they interpret their own power. I would like to delve deeper into their categorization systems regarding their power and explore how they describe and explain the social reality in which they are currently active, which is laden with contradictions when it comes to power – what Gabriel Abend (2011) refers to as *thick morality*, one that deals with the ongoing formation of moral identities and symbolic practices that become part of social institutions. I seek a profound understanding of how the interviewees imagine themselves as moral beings. I want to decipher what makes them feel worthy and deconstruct out of the phenomenology of power the moral cultural pressures they experience as subjects in each organizational context. The theoretical lenses of cultural sociology, particularly the cultural sociology of morality, enable such an analysis, as it focuses on moral logics as a kind of cultural toolbox that varies across sociocultural, organizational and professional contexts (Lamont 1992; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Hitlin and Andersson 2015; Cohen and Dromi 2018; Avnoon et al. 2023). The use of these lenses, as well as of the comparative perspective, will shed light on the subject’s interpretive toolbox as it is shaped in according with the organizational context.

These lenses also enable to trace cultural processes not only on the individual level, but also intersubjectively (Lamont et al. 2014), through the examination of shared cultural scripts and structures, such as frames, narratives, repertoires, and symbolic boundaries. Thus, they will enable to follow the trickling down of cultural processes related to power into the organization, through the interpretation of subjects in power positions. This way, I will be able to decipher practices that reproduce gender inequality in organizations boasting equality ethics, as the interviewees’ perceptions both express power relations and produce them.

One of the major scholars informing this analytical nexus between power, ethics and gender is Judith Butler (Butler 1988, 2005a). Following Foucault, she claimed that power is strongly related with individuals’ sense of morality and humanity, and together, with gender norms. The ability to comply with social norms and rules is significant because of the need to become intelligible and to be recognized as a subject. The subjection process occurs according to heterosexual norms (Butler 2005b, 2005a). 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).

Informed by these theoretical lenses, in a previous study on the phenomenology of power among women officers in the Israeli military I have shown how they constituted themselves as moral agents in the face of the delegitimization of their power as women, using discursive strategies such as moral boundary-work and self-positioning as authentic subjects. These strategies took shape within the military’s logics of power and normative gender order as an extremely gendered organization. The officers’ interpretive discourse within the logics of organizational power reflects the type of subjects produced by different organizational contexts (Karazi-Presler 2021). Accordingly, these findings led to the current research development of comparing two organizational contexts, academia and high-tech, concerning perceptions of power and ethics of gender equality.

***Gendered Power in Organizations: Expanding the Gaze toward a Phenomenology of Power***

In examining the phenomenology of power among women and men in different organizational contexts, the present study contributes to the extensive literature on gendered power in organizations. The research discussion on power and gender in organizations indicates an enduring inequality in access to material resources (Ridgeway 2011), and structural obstacles to promotion (Ridgeway 2011, 2015; Calás et al. 2014; Bell and Sinclair 2016). Much of this literature assumes that when women hold power positions, they experience a dilemma: unlike men, when they adopt behaviors identified with direct and confident leadership, they attract negative responses (Kanter 1977; Foschi 1996; Correll et al. 2020). Often, these responses are focused on their (lack of) sexuality, their body, and private lives (Beard 2017; Karazi-Presler 2021; Kenny and Fanchini 2023). Accordingly, their 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 power 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 is that women’s power is not a stable property, but one that varies across social groups and sociocultural and organizational contexts (Acker 2006; Turco 2010; Anthias 2012). The theoretical emphasis on the complexity of regimes of inequality provides important insights into the relation between gender and power in organizations, since it allows us to study power not only in terms of oppression and control (“power over”), but also about the various scopes of action available to women actors by virtue of their social positioning both within and outside the organization.

The second research current’s emphasis on *agency* focuses on women’s ability to exert power within gendered organizational structures. It derives from the feminist opposition to viewing women only as victims and that they are able to resist the organizational gender order, if only locally and pragmatically (Ferree 2001; Martin 2001, 2006; Thomas and Davies 2005; Karazi-Presler 2020). Power positions are often viewed as emancipatory, contributing to women’s ability to resist the gender order. The constant approaching and sometimes breaching of the glass ceiling contributes to women’s ability to serve as change agents in organizational environments (Stainback et al. 2016). Ironically, however, quite a few studies suggest that women who advance up the organization’s hierarchy are subjected to even more intense pressures to adjust to its gendered culture (van den Brink and Benschop 2012; Stainback et al. 2016; Karazi-Presler and Wasserman 2022). It is also argued that such advancement isolates them, making them more exposed to gendered practices closely associated with power, such as sexual harassment (Stainback et al. 2011, 2016; McLaughlin et al. 2012).

Despite this extensive literature, only a handful of studies have directly addressed the narratives used by powerful women to talk about their own and others’ power, or the phenomenological meanings associated with power (for exceptions, see Karazi-Presler et al. 2018; Karazi-Presler 2020, 2021). Moreover, studies on gender and power in organizations are usually based on women’s experiences. The literature on masculinity and power in the contemporary workspace is only just emerging, hence the contribution of the current research: its comparative perspective will provide a more complete theoretical and empirical picture of gender and power.

Men are often seen as obstructing women’s progress and their sense of worth in organizations (Cockburn 1991; Martin 2006; Prime and Moss-Racusin 2009; Pullen and Simpson 2009; McKinsey&Company 2012; Ely and Kimmel 2018). Over the years, studies have revealed how men need to respond to social norms and pressures pushes them to behaviors considered “bad but bold” (Glick et al. 2004), or quite simply toxic behaviors such as 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, it varies across class, racial and ethnic positioning and is certainly not absolute. In the case of men, this is also because 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 crisis, struggle, loss and a need for rehabilitation, and studies often focus on the precarity of the masculine status (Berdahl et al. 2018; Khanna and Meadow 2023). This precarity is due to the loss of men’s (nearly exclusive) status as breadwinners, undermining their traditional gender dominance and denying their cultural entitlement to power (Knights and Pullen 2019). Moreover, the changes attendant on the feminist movement, MeToo, the cancel culture and political correctness have made many men anxious and feeling unable to meet ethical standards of gender equality at work, with the potential loss of material and symbolic resources entailed. For the contemporary populist right wing, this precarity crisis serves as a discursive justification for expressing a longing to a mythical, male-dominated past, and demand a relegitimation of traits such as aggressiveness and physical strength. This longing arguably echoes strongly among lower-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 the lives of middle-to-upper-class men, on the other hand – including those who belong to the organizational contexts examined in the proposed study – hegemonic and caring masculinities appear to “sit alongside one another” (Hunter et al. 2017). It is therefore unclear how the contradictory cultural forces described herein – the demand for greater equality and the longing for traditional values – affect their organizational day-to-day. Due to the dichotomic focus on men as subject entitled to or losing power, another research lacuna addressed in the proposed study has to do with men as organizational change agents. The proposed comparative examination of conceptions of gendered power by powerful men and women in organizations that espouse an egalitarian ethics will enable to identify a variety of subjective interpretations and representations of gendered power by highlighting multiple, complex, and competing discourses of masculinities and femininities.

**Research Objectives & Expected Significance**

The proposed study is designed to examine the phenomenology of power among men and women in two organizational contexts characterized by an ethics of gender equality – high-tech and academia – against the background of glocal cultural struggles related to power and gender equality. I will explore how subjects conceptualize gendered power and examine the uses they make of cultural resources in their contemporary discourse on power.

Based on 12 pilot interviews with men in mid-level management positions in the Israeli high-tech industry, the interviewees viewed themselves as change agents who aspired to establish equality in their organization. They sought to differentiate themselves from moral stigmas liable to cling to them as myogenous or even violent men. At the same time, they pointed to the progress of contemporary cultural dynamics and institutional arrangements regarding power and gender at work, which they felt was too rapid. They expressed *inconvenience*, and a resulting lack of freedom or joy at the workplace, due to their constant need to comply with emotional and self-censorship rules (politically correct language and non-sexist behavior). In the main, they were afraid of moral social denigration and stigmatization.

This sense of *inconvenience* at the workplace sheds light on cultural norms, moral-emotional pressures, and tensions in the subjects’ perceptions of power and control, must be deconstructed. Specifically, the interviewees’ words reveal an intriguing gap between their self-descriptions as equality or change agents and the moral fear they constantly experience – the fear of being classified as agents of *in*equaity. This gap produces a sociological drama that needs to be deciphered in order to understand how social actors can unwittingly take part in social reproduction of gender inequality.

The research questions informed by these interviews inductively address the way men in power positions understand their role regarding gender relations at work through aspects of power and morality, and the way they claim moral worth under social circumstances where they fear it is denied from them. I would also like to examine how women in power position interpret contemporary gender power relations, having likely experienced various organizational barriers, but also managed to overcome some of them. For example, are there situations where the subjective conception of gendered power at work progresses, while institutional regulation regresses? How can women operate in such a regressive environment? A recent example is the Israeli Civil Service Commission’s prohibition on writing tenders using gender inclusive language.

Specifically, my research will be guided by four main questions:

1. What interpretive schemes do the participants use regarding power? How do men and women in power position in academia and high-tech organizations understand power? How do they construct the concept of power, what narratives and meanings do they weave in relation to it?
2. What cultural-moral imperatives regarding power are imposed on subjects in the two organizational contexts? For example, how is political correctness at work perceived by subjects, morally and emotionally? How is political correctness about gendered power translated into daily language and practices? What forms does it take in the two contexts?
3. Are there any gender (as well as class, race, ethnic and other) differences in the discourse of justification and legitimation used by subjects with regard to gendered power and equality ethics at work? Are there gender and contextual differences in the discourse on sense of entitlement and privilege as opposed to aspects of obligations with relation to power?
4. How is the micro level of the interviewees’ conceptions and experiences of power translated into interpretive mechanisms on the meso level (the organizational environment and organizational regulations and imperatives)?

In this study I offer an analysis that focuses on phenomenological aspects of power, the moral commitments of individuals, the value they constitute for themselves as subjects in gendered organizations, and the roles all these play in constituting gender (in)equality in work environments. I therefore expect the study to contribute to contemporary sociological discussions of gendered power in organizations and play an innovative role in contemporary research on the sociology of gender and organizations.

**Research Design and Methodology Organizational Contexts**

Ideally, academia and high-tech are perceived as characterized by moral imperatives and organizational arrangements that support social equality. In practice, however, they are characterized by persistent masculine norms, including competitiveness, individualism, and neoliberalism, and enduring inequality regimes (Alfrey and Twine 2017; De Coster and Zanoni 2019; Connel 2022; Reyes 2022). The difference between them lies in that while in academic institutions the equality ethics is seen as inherent, informed by a tradition of enlightenment (although today’s universities and colleges operate according to the requirements of the neoliberal market), in technological corporations it is seen as imported from the outside, as part of an instrumental discourse of corporate responsibility (De Coster and Zanoni 2019; Connel 2022; Reyes 2022). Another key characteristic shared by the two contexts is their straddling of the structural seam between the national-local and the global fields. Thus, the subjects in power positions within them are active interchangeably in two spheres: according to a global ethics of equality, but also subject to keen awareness of global and local counter-movements, which requires them to translate abstract social ethics into daily practices in a way that may diverge from the former. The comparative perspective at the core of the proposed study enables to identify the organizational interpretive toolbox regarding power, assuming that the relation between the subject and the cultural discourse on power is shaped differently in various organizational cultures and contexts. It will also allow me to identify how (in)equality operates on the meso-organizational level, specifically.

***The Academic Context***

Worldwide, the higher education sphere has been transformed over the past three decades. Market-oriented managerial reforms have changed researchers’ professional lives, so that nearly every aspect of them is currently an object of quantitative measurement. At the same time, regulations related to gender equality have been tied together with neoliberal logics and the new public management (Thomas and Davies 2002; Parsons and Priola 2013; De Coster and Zanoni 2019). In Israel, for example, some of the criteria for submitting grants to international funds depend on organizational arrangements to ensure gender equity and social diversity. These criteria push universities and colleges to join global equality initiatives, as well as establish internal diversity and inclusion units, often out of strictly financial motives.

Apparently, the dominant neoliberal values in today’s colleges and universities conflict with traditional academic values such as freedom, autonomy, and community-building (Lund and Tienari 2019). These values are often expressed in popular cultural discourse through criticism and even ridiculing of academia as progressive, and at the same time as an ivory tower not related to social reality, using labels such as “tenured radicals” (Kimball 1990). This criticism is focused on one of the main moral imperatives that has developed in academia to become a significant concern in work environments and in culture in general – political correctness. This imperative has emerged as part of the liberal hegemony in academia, expressed for example in liberal curricula, critical studies of social inequality, intellectual censorship, the challenging of cultural canons, and the establishment of new departments focused on excluded groups (Schwarz 2023).

Another key characteristic of academia which clashes with its imagined values is the neoliberal pattern of the “ideal academic”, based on conceptions of hegemonic masculinity such as competitiveness, rationalism, and control (Knights and Clarke 2014; Lund and Tienari 2019; Connel 2022). A rich literature addresses the patriarchal class elitism that characterizes academia and its multiple forms of discrimination (Moss-Racusin et al. 2012; Savigny 2014; Rivera 2017; Rhodes et al. 2018; De Coster and Zanoni 2019; Prasad et al. 2020). This literature argues that gender and racial inequality serve as organizing principles of academia (Reyes 2022). The common neoliberal response to demands for social equality in academic space, beyond the existing regulation, is that in order to succeed academically, subjects need to play by the rules. However, women and members of (other) excluded groups do not always have sufficient access to the unwritten but significant rules of the game – referred to as the hidden curriculum (Reyes 2022). For example, women, who usually bear most of the responsibility for caregiving, and who cope with gendering and racism in academia, are expected to match the “scholarly productivity” of ideal academics. The ostensibly abstract concept of the ideal academic is in fact identified with men, who bear fewer caregiving responsibilities or have the material resources allowing them to avoid these responsibilities (Reyes 2022). The expectation of all researchers to attain similar achievements despite various structural barriers and different ways of coping means that the academic work environment in fact reproduces norms that are far from equality or progressivity.

The gendered structure of Israeli research universities means women academics are underrepresented in tenured tracks, compared to their representation in doctoral programs. Conversely, they are highly represented among external and non-tenured lecturers (Rivera 2017). As in other workplaces, over the years the gender gaps in universities, in Israel in particular, have narrowed, but the male dominance in senior ranks is retained. In the lowest rank on a tenured track, that of lecturer, women and men are almost equally represented in research universities. In the next rank, senior tenured lecturer, women are 40%. In the most senior rank of full professor, only 17% are women. The situation is even worse in key managerial positions: only three university presidents in the entire history of Israeli higher education have served as university presidents, out of a total of ninety. Currently, only one woman serves in that position (Council for the Advancement of Women in Science and Technology 2022).

At the same time, despite not being fully realized in practice, the ethos of critical thought and the ethics of equality in higher education are currently subject to direct attacks by illiberal and populist thinkers and politicians, who seek to take over academic spheres, reduce academic freedom and weaken their liberal aspects. In the US, this trend culminated in the recent Supreme Court decision to end affirmative action in college admissions (Lamont 2023). Given the close relations between Israeli and American academia and similar processes in Israel, questions regarding power and gender are becoming highly significant and timely in the local context as well.

***The High-Tech Context***

In global high-tech corporations operating in Israel – the second context examined in the proposed study – technological savvy and skills are constitutive elements of male identities. There is a strong symbolic and embodied relationship between masculinity and technology, whereas culturally speaking, the latter is seen as unrelated to femininity (MellstrÖm 2004; Kelan 2007). Studies of gender inequality in STEM areas have documented a persistent organizational-cultural climate that excludes women. Despite the recent increase in the number of women, the industry has remained essentially masculine (Rhodes et al. 2018). Consequently, many women who do enter STEM fields leave them, in what is commonly referred to as the “leaky pipeline” (Blickenstaff 2005; Alfrey and Twine 2017).

The masculine climate in the tech industry is also characterized by a “geeky” subculture serving as a regime of inequality (Acker 2006). The term “geek” is culturally identified with masculine appearance, traits and leisure activities. Like its cultural predecessor, “nerd”, it used to be an insult directed at intelligent people with a predilection for computer games or fantasy literature, who lack social skills. Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg is a prime example. Like him, geeky men are currently considered role models and a source of symbolic capital also sought by women. According to Alfrey and Twine (2017), women in the industry feel that their professional competence was often measured by their geekiness, which included not only technical skills but also personality traits, appearance, areas of interest, cultural knowledge, and mainly gender blurring.

The 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 ideal employee is a privileged White man (MellstrÖm 2004; Selwyn 2007; Frenkel 2008; Issac 2017; Berdahl et al. 2018; Reid et al. 2018). The masculinity images associated with such cultural icons as Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos suggest a sense of entitlement that borders on sheer irresponsibility, young and energetic masculinity maintained to the point of utter egoism, and a thin new-age veneer that conceals neoliberal if not Fordist logics (Surowiecki 2014).

Although as in the previous context, the Israeli hi-tech industry is umbilically attached to its American counterpart, one local characteristic is the fact that the Israeli military (a hyper-masculine state organization in its own right) has a critical impact on one’s ability to attain positions of power in the industry and affects its masculine culture.

The rate of women employed in the booming Israeli high-tech industry is relatively low. As in the academic context, this is particularly evident in senior managerial positions: women represent only 22.6% of management members in technology companies, and less than 10% of the managers heading startups (Soroker and Nayar 2022). There are also high gender gaps in pay (Central Bureau of Statistics 2023). Overall, the high-tech industry is 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 diversity populations in the industry, including women but also non-Jews and Mizrahi Jews, reveals the depth of the inequality regimes in it. Nevertheless, 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, like universities, their diversity and inclusion policies are often motivated by instrumental, external financial considerations (Rose and Bielby 2011). Most recently, however, with the rise of an extreme rightwing government in Israel that promotes the exclusion of women and other minorities, and there is real fear that companies would be influenced by government policies and statements and avoid implementing many of the regulations and practices already in place to promote gender equality.

**Feminist Qualitative Epistemology and Methodology**

The methodology of the proposed study is informed by two closely related approaches – the phenomenological-interpretive and feminist (Harding 1988, 2012; Reed 2011) – given their shared emphasis on knowledge sources forming within a subjective daily consciousness. According to these approaches, questions that appear to be “strictly” methodological are fundamentally political, which is particularly relevant to the current sociological analysis of power. The assumption regarding conceptualizations of power in this study is that they are strongly affected by power relations and intersectional dynamics (related to gender as it intersects with sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, etc.) experienced by the participants. The latter is also true of the researcher herself, a young woman in early stages of her academic career, while at the same time seeking to study it critically. This would necessitate reflexive processes that require defamiliarization with academia as a field of research, as well as feelings of familiarity, vulnerability by the researcher employed in this sphere.

In view of the epistemic conceptions grounding this study and given its objectives, in-depth interviews represent the most appropriate research tool. As suggested by Lamont and Swidler (2014), interviews allow to examine “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 research, since they enable systematic attention to the research design, to situations, contexts and types of individuals. Moreover, in-depth interviews allow tracing emotions, including social anxieties and pressures occurring in various cultural contexts, and understanding pieces of culture used by subjects in their day-to-day (Pugh 2013; Tavory 2020; Lareau 2021; Small and Calarco 2022). Note that work in academia and high-tech involves frequent travel, so that some of the interviews may be conducted via Zoom. Based on my previous research experience, Zoom can be a space for establishing intimacy and a sense of rapport between the interviewer and the interviewees (Archibald et al. 2019; Oliffe et al. 2021).

In addition to interviews, I intend to use another data collection method: analysis of various policy papers and organizational documents on gender diversity and inclusion in higher education and high-tech. I will focus on the organizations where the participants are employed. This analysis will be conducted with the consent of the participants and their organization, and subject to commitment to blur all identifying details. The rationale for this content analysis is the need to learn the terminology used in the two contexts. Its value for the present research lies in enabling an examination of gaps between discourse structured on the declarative and practical levels. This method will enable a mapping of tensions in the participants’ social world regarding their power – a key piece in the puzzle I would like to complete. The combination of interviews and content analysis will allow me to decipher the network of relations between the micro level of subjects, the meso level of the organizational environment with its imperatives and arrangements, and the macro level of political-cultural discourses.

**Stage 1: Sample recruitment, empirical data collection, and preliminary analysis (November 2024-February 2026**

The proposed study will be based on 120 in-depth interviews. The interviewees in the academic context – thirty women and thirty men – will be mid-level managers (department heads and research institute directors) from a variety of disciplines, representing Israel’s leading research universities: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, Haifa University, Ben-Gurion University, Open University, Weitzmann Institute, and Technion – Israel Institute of Technology. The interviewees in the high-tech context – thirty men and thirty women – will also be mid-level managers, serving in a variety of technical, as well as training and HR jobs, in global giants such as Google, Meta, and Amazon. The idea is to assess the potential implications of power conceptions shaped in the organizational positioning between local and global. As in the academic context, the choice of mid-level managers is derived from the need to examine how organizational policy is mediated and translated into daily practices.

The participants will be recruited using the snowball technique, with the inclusion criteria being rank and organizational context. To further expand the range of potential candidates, I will also use social media groups dedicated to academics and high-tech employees. Each interview will take between 90 and 180 minutes to complete. All will be recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent.

Note that 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 deeper in follow-up interviews. Moreover, as part of the abductive reasoning guiding this study (see Tavory and Timmermans 2014), I will document all interview occurrences carefully and maintain meticulous fieldnotes. Combined with the analysis of organizational documents, these will serve to create a robust and “thick” database that will support the process of discovering analytical “surprises” and innovative, inductive reasoning.

**Stage 2: Complete Analysis, Interpretation, and Write-Up (February 2026-September 2027)**

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

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