***The Wonder Women of the IDF: The Role of a Virtual Community in Improved Employee Experience and Organizational Commitment among career military service Women***

# Abstract

This qualitative study examines how membership in the virtual women's community, Wonder Women, contributes to increased and significant involvement among career women in OG. Interviews with managers and members of this community revealed that its members experience an improved sense of belonging and greater engagement with the community and the army as an organization. Nevertheless, important gaps in the women’s levels of satisfaction as members of the organization persist. The findings indicate that when enlisted women become mothers, friction arises as they are called upon to balance their responsibilities as parents, on the one hand, and professionals, on the other. This friction is aggravated by gender disparities and differing expectations on the part of the organization as to the roles and responsibilities of enlisted men and women. Especially in the context of extraordinary events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the #MeToo movement, and perceptions of well-being at work. This study is significant because it examines the reciprocal effects of virtual communities and the organizations where community members work on their sense of belonging and engagement.

**Keywords:** Virtual Community of Practice – VCoP, sense of belonging, gendered work engagement, government organization

# Introduction

While theoretical approaches have addressed change processes in organizations concerning employee belonging and engagement (Jesiek et al., 2018), empirical studies on the impact of professional virtual communities, particularly for women service members in the army, are lacking. This research explores how such communities support these women in coping with the challenges of permanent service. Research shows that well-being and belonging, crucial for organizational success, show disparities across genders and types of organizations (Gallup, 2016; Miller & Adkins, 2016). The integration of women in military organizations, especially in combat roles and career advancement, is also a focus of recent studies (Mishra et al., 2022; Fieldhouse & O'Leary, 2020; Harel, 2023). However, there is a gap in understanding the contribution of informal communities to the organization among permanently enlisted women.

Wonder Women community is one of an increasing number of physical and virtual communities within this government organization composed of active-duty women soldiers, both conscripted and permanent staff. Founded in 2016 by two female permanent staff members, the community operates through WhatsApp and Facebook. It was established as a space for women serving in this government organization who had given birth and were on maternity leave to share their experiences of parenthood and service. Over time, the community has grown, creating sub-communities addressing specific issues, such as fertility treatments, pregnancy, breastfeeding during service, and more. During the research period, there were over 3,800 members in the Wonder Women community (Author C & Author D, 2023).

~~Militaries are defined as mission-driven organizations. Military personnel are expected to personally identify with the goals and objectives of the organization and commit to them fully (Hakanen et al., 2019). Mission-driven organizations face the challenge of finding employees who share the organization’s values and goals.~~

~~This government organization is one of the few armies in the world that has mandated the conscription of women and has done so since its establishment in 1948 (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018). Today, more than 90% of IDF positions are open to female soldiers, indicating a significant achievement in overcoming gender barriers and promoting inclusivity within the military forces (Harel, 2023). In 2021, there were 46 women serving with the rank of colonel, up from 39 in the previous year. Furthermore, the percentage of female officers achieving the rank of major grew from 25% to 29% over five years. These developments represent a considerable shift in the gender dynamics of the IDF, showing both a policy-level commitment to gender equality and a growing interest among women to serve in various military capacities, including combat roles (Harel, 2023).~~

~~After completing their mandatory service, Israelis who sign on for additional service begin their military careers aged around 20−21 (Loker et al., 2015). When engaged in permanent service, personnel can expect to transition between roles and be shifted to bases across the country as they continually strive for advancement and promotion. Failing to secure a position incurs the risk of having to leave the armed forces and seek civilian employment. The decision to commit organizationally to the military involves choosing a career that offers personal fulfillment and a professional future. Benefits include early retirement and a pension, but job security is low, and family life must adjust to irregular hours and frequent absences. Dolav and Pedan (2014) showed that both men and women base the decision to stay in permanent service more on intrinsic factors, such as recognizing their contribution to the organization, job satisfaction, and social connections with colleagues, than on extrinsic factors like salary, service benefits (like a car), and advancement.~~

As mission-driven organizations, militaries require personnel to align closely with their goals (Hakanen et al., 2019). The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), established in 1948, is unique in its mandated conscription of women, with over 90% of positions open to them, reflecting progress in gender inclusivity (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018; Harel, 2023). Typically, mandatory services take two to three years 18-21, and most of the soldiers’ face transitions to civilian employment; others continue as career soldiers. If functional success is not achieved that would allow promotion, the soldiers will be dismissed from the military (Loker et al., 2015). Commitment to military service is influenced more by intrinsic factors like job satisfaction and social connections than extrinsic rewards (Dolav and Pedan, 2014).

This qualitative study, examines the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), a mission-driven military organization with a high percentage of female soldiers (Hakanen et al., 2019; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018; Harel, 2023). It explores the role of the "Wonder Women" virtual community in enhancing belonging and engagement among women service members. The innovative research focuses on professional women's informal communities within the military and aims to understand the subjective meanings assigned to their experiences (Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S., 2018). It addresses how these communities impact gendered work engagement and organizational commitment, particularly in light of challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and #MeToo movement.. For simplicity, military personnel will be referred to as “employees in the organization” throughout the article and we use GO for Government Organization.

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## Virtual Community

Wonder Women, the community examined in this study, is a virtual online community of practice and is made up of women professionals in the government organization. Gerard Delanty’s (2012) views a community as a symbolic system, a cultural-normative model, promoting social and political practices and institutional arrangements? This definition clearly fits the scope of Wonder Women as an intra-organizational community. Delanty (2012) described four main approaches to the concept of community in modern research. The first concerns a shared space for dialogue; the second emphasizes cultural aspects of identity; the third approach refers to community in terms of political awareness and collective action; and the fourth focuses on global, cosmopolitan, and virtual networks.

A Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) falls under the category of a shared space for dialogue because it emphasizes the communicative element of a professional community of practice (CoP). In this study, we rely on the definition by Etienne Wenger et al. (2002) of a community of practice within an organization: “These people share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area through ongoing interaction” (p. 4). In the case of a VCoP, community members interact with each other partially or fully online, using social media, online forums, or instant messaging applications. Members of virtual communities can connect regardless of geographical location or time zone.

VCoPs are recognized in two forms: the first, and most common, are communities established by an organization as part of the organizational structure and managerial tools for information gathering from the field, message transmission, etc. (Dubé et al., 2006); the second are communities with voluntary membership formed by employees within an organization for various purposes (Delgado et al., 2021). These communities are informal entities within the organization, like the community presented in this study.

Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP) have **disadvantages** arising from the lack of face-to-face interaction, limited opportunities for building trust and closeness, and the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings. Compared to organization-sponsored VCoPs, voluntarily joined virtual communities may not provide the same commitment expected from an employee with a work contract. However, one of the **advantages** of VCoP is enhanced access to information and resources. Dei & van der Walt (2020) argued that virtual communities are valuable tools for managing both formal and informal holistic knowledge in organizations, as they have multi-dimensional practical value in reducing costs, for example, by streamlining information transfer and efficiently utilizing organizational resources. Additional benefits of VCoP include the ability to connect with people of diverse opinions and flexible communication times. VCoPs can also more easily build a culture and shared values within an organization and create connections between different departments or groups. An example is provided in the research of Blanchard & Horan (2000), who found that social capital and civic engagement increase as virtual communities develop around physical communities. Another advantage of VCoPs is their ability to give employees a sense of belonging to a larger community beyond their immediate team or department.

Research examining the Wonder Women community characteristics, the information and knowledge generated within it, and its impact on the military organization (Author A & Author B, 2023) found that values of mutual aid among members, adherence to loyalty codes to the military organization, and openness to a variety of opinions, as well as the diversity of roles, ranks, and units of its members, contribute to making the community a fertile ground for ready sharing and quick responses. The Wonder Women community has several unique characteristics. Unlike communities established top-down by the military organization, the Wonder Women community of permanent staff women is characterized by a bottom-up formation initiated by the women to respond to their needs. However, it has founders and domain managers. Unlike the military organization, the community operates in a network rather than with a hierarchical structure. In a predominantly male and aggressive organization, Wonder Women creates a protected zone for female consultation and an environment for the exchange of opinions. Wonder Women has been active daily for several years, with a growing membership. In addition to the virtual communication format of the community (WhatsApp and Facebook), some community members opt to occasionally meet face-to-face in homes or public places, such as playgrounds. Over the years, ideas for initiatives to benefit women and their families have emerged in the community’s consultation forums and were later adopted by the military. These features have contributed to helping community members cope daily and handle long-term changes in this government organization, such as changes in employment contracts for permanent staff, changes to commander-subordinate relationships, and shifts in time invested in family and work.

Researchers are divided in their opinions on the uniqueness of gender-specific communities. Some have found that compared to general virtual communities, gender-specific virtual communities place more emphasis on creating group identity through the design of communication style and content in the group, divided into stages of identifying and approving community members and encouraging active participation in the community (Banihani et al., 2013; Foulidi & Papakitsos, 2020). The common aspect of these studies is the importance of community management and leadership in building the community around its goals and making sure the members stay on topic and respect ethical boundaries. These common aspects provide a starting point for analyzing the impact of a virtual community like Wonder Women on its members.

## Sense of Belonging and Work Engagement

A “sense of belonging” refers to a psychological state characterized by an employee’s close relationship and personal identification with the organization they work for. It is a state of mind that can affect an employee’s effort investment, dedication to the organization’s goals, and loyalty (Delgado et al., 2021; Sharma & Kaur, 2019). Work engagement is defined as a positive and fulfilling emotional state related to work, characterized by dynamism, dedication, and immersion in work, and is also expressed in organizational commitment. Work engagement manifests in the form of high energy and psychological resilience during work, willingness to invest effort in work, perseverance even in the face of difficulties, a sense of meaning, enthusiasm, inspiration, and pride, feeling challenged by, focused on, and invested in work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Organizational commitment and work engagement are interrelated. Engaged employees who demonstrate high levels of immersion, dedication, and dynamism are likelier to perform their tasks better and exhibit higher organizational commitment (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Both feelings and actions characterize commitment and engagement.

Studies indicate that employees’ sense of belonging and engagement in an organization are essential for both the employees and the organization. Organizations express their commitment to their employees by providing social support (Patro, 2013). Employees identify with the organization’s values and work to achieve its goals and objectives (Hakanen et al., 2019). Belonging and engagement result in higher personal initiative, improved outputs, efficient use of work time, long-term persistence in the organization, a culture of empowerment, increased turnover, and cost and time savings (Schaufeli et al., 2002). A sense of commitment and active engagement positively affects employees, too. Engaged employees are more optimistic, maintain better interpersonal relationships (Jena et al., 2018), and have better perseverance and self-esteem (Scrima et al., 2014). Engaged employees are also more responsive to learning opportunities, more willing to support work colleagues and assist their superiors in decision-making (Channa, 2020; Verčič & Vokić, 2017), and generally feel enthusiastic about their work (Chandani et al., 2016). The cost of mediocre or low employee engagement is a feeling of disconnection from their role and fear of losing their job, leading to a decline in their performance, outputs, and the organization falling short of its goals (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to invest in creating an engaged workforce (Chandani et al., 2016).

Organizations can enhance engagement by addressing and examining employees’ suggestions for improvements, increasing their commitment to the organization, and creating transparency from senior management (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016). Thus, integrating employees into the company culture through discussions about career development opportunities, encouragement, communication, recognition, flexible working hours, fair pay structure, a transparent and open work environment, and participation in decision-making contribute to employee engagement at work (Patro, 2013).

## Changes in the World of Work and Their Impact on Sense of Belonging and Engagement in Organizations

Changes in the world over the last decade have also affected employees’ sense of involvement and active engagement in organizations. These changes include generational shifts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and gender aspects.

Generational characteristics impact work engagement. For example, Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, is more committed to their employers than Millenials, the generation born between 1982 and 1992, which is characterized by more independence, self-confidence, and critical expression (Howe & Strauss, 2007). The latter is even more true for Generation Z, born around the beginning of this century (Gallup, 2016; Kismono & Hanggarawati, 2022), who tend to change jobs based on individual fit (Suomäki et al., 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen changes to the labor market. These changes further emphasized individual aspects in employees’ perception of belonging to an organization. The shift in the work world, along with a wave of layoffs, created norms of part-time work, flexible hours, and hybrid work partly done from home, making it harder for employees to feel connected to their organizations and leading to a sense of loss of control for employers (Pass & Ridgway, 2022). Employers’ solutions to these effects included an understanding approach to employees wanting to work from home, inviting employees to return in the future, and offering preferred employment and salary conditions (Formica & Sfodera, 2022).

The pandemic-induced changes in work habits led to a renewed focus on developing personal and team resilience to strengthen the connection between the employee and the organization. Organizations based their approach on the assumption that empowering the connection between personal and social capital would strengthen the coping resources of both the individual and the organization in facing the new situation (Blanchard & Horan, 2000). Success occurs when an organization has the following: personal capital, including the employee’s knowledge, skills, abilities, and aspirations; social capital, including social networks among employees in the organization; and cultural-organizational capital, including the connection to the place, local pride, and the shared identity of the organization (Pass & Ridgway, 2022).

From a gender perspective, the #MeToo movement unprecedently exposed issues of gender discrimination and exclusion within organizations. A study in the medical field (Moser & Branscombe, 2022) found three components that contribute to the development and engagement of women in the workplace: proper and tailored mentoring, especially at the beginning of their career; a climate of gender equality, which is even more critical in organizations where men are numerically or functionally dominant; and opportunities for professional development. According to the study, women’s engagement in an organization helps create a positive experience for working women. Improving these aspects can contribute to women’s advancement in the corporate sector and changes in their employment policies, as women are still often employed in lower management positions (Mohammadkhani & Dariush, 2016).

In extreme situations like the lockdowns experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, conservative voices emerged regarding gender role divisions. In contrast, the individuality of employees and the need for organizational flexibility were emphasized. To cope with such challenges, organizations must create safer and more inclusive environments and provide opportunities for building social and organizational resilience that meet the needs of both routine activities and emergencies (Pass & Ridgway, 2022).

## Work Engagement in the Government Organization

Armies are based on a distinctive organizational culture that involves a total commitment to work (service) wherever and whenever duty calls (O’Mahony et al., 2017). The Israeli army is characterized by intensive activities that sometimes involve risks but operates in a limited operational space within the borders of Israel. Although established as a people’s army and enlisting women from its foundation, this government organization is characterized by a hierarchy in which most of the senior command is male. The dominance of men in command positions shapes the identity of women soldiers in contrast to men. The dominance of men in the army is a result of most combatants being men. Few women are integrated into command and combat roles, most being involved in combat-support professions (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018).

Meir Elran et al. (2021) studied the commitment of employees working in crisis events such as war and pandemics. The scholar found that the government organizations' personnel, including combat-support staff, are similar to their non-enlisted 25−35-year-old peers. These young people are dealing with two recent trends: the “Great Resignation,” which refers to a mass trend of leaving workplaces, and “Quiet Quitting,” where employees emphasize well-being and leisure in addition to work (Elran et al., 2021; Formica & Sfodera, 2022). According to Sandro Formica and Fabiola Sfodera (2022), these two types of resignation began during the COVID-19 period and require a paradigm shift and rethinking by managers in formulating strategies and human resource processes. The implication is that the army, like other organizations, must address how to create a sense of well-being, belonging, and motivation in employees so they do not leave.

# Methodology

**Research Question**

This qualitative study examines if and how membership in a virtual women's community, the Wonder Women, improves employee experience and organizational commitment among women in career military service, especially in the balance between professional and parental responsibilities.

## *Research Design*

The research is a qualitative case study. Case study research examines the characteristics of a unique phenomenon and seeks to generalize to similar phenomena (Yin, 2013). It allows examining the experiences and community feelings regarding involvement, belonging, and well-being of its members in the organization in terms of “… meaningful social action and gather large quantities of detailed qualitative data to acquire an in-depth understanding of how meaning is created in everyday life in the real world.” (Travis, 1999, p. 1042).

## *Data Collection*

The research included interviews with the women who founded and managed the Wonder Women virtual community, using purposive sampling instead of random sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This method involves sampling people with a particular interest (politically essential cases), for example, due to their role, hierarchical position, or connection to social networks, which is reflected in their words or actions (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

After a personal approach and interview with the leading community manager, a request letter was sent to the other thirteen community managers for a focus group interview. Seven of them responded and participated along with the community manager. The focus group lasted about two and a half hours in a video call. It was recorded and transcribed with the participants’ consent. They were asked to describe the community’s founding, their personal story of joining, and the importance of the community for them and their members, including current challenges and future expectations. About a year later, individual interviews were conducted with eight community members not defined as managers to examine processes that occurred during the year and get the perspective of regular members. Finally, another conversation with the community manager helped to sharpen the interpretation.

## *Participants*

In the study, sixteen women were interviewed: the founder and manager of the community, seven community managers, and eight regular members. The interviewees’ ages ranged from 25 to 38. Most were mothers and served in the organization at mid-level ranks from Captain to Lieutenant Colonel, with a minority at a higher rank (Colonel) or lower ranks (Lieutenant or Warrant Officer). The women served in various roles: administrative (57%), technological (15%), and professional (28%), such as legal, logistics, and computing.

## *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed using open coding, a method suitable for obtaining valid and reliable results from textual data (Charmaz, 2000). The responses were then subjected to content analysis. To increase inter-judge reliability, the researchers’ analyses were compared and re-examined until consensus was reached on the narrative, which was analyzed and integrated into the research as “…a shared construction of experience and meaning” because, as described and emphasized by For Lyman, “social construction is reality” (1997:14). The summary conversation with the community manager helped to refine the interpretation.

## *Ethics*

At the beginning of each interview and focus group, interviewees were told that participation could be terminated at any time, that their contributions would be presented using pseudonyms, and that there would be no disclosure of their unit or role affiliation. The community managers agreed to disclose the community’s name. The ethics committee of the academic institution approved the research.

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# Findings

The interviews revealed a central theme with two main gaps in the community’s feelings regarding involvement and occupational commitment to the organization. The first was a gap between their expectations and their actual experiences, and the second was the gender gap they perceived as women in the military. Within each of these identified gaps, the community’s contribution to its members’ sense of belonging and engagement as professional military employees and the development and continuity of their careers also emerged.

## Expectation Gap

The expectation gap expressed by community members focuses on the support, recognition, and rewards they receive from their commanders and the military. The command model accentuates the gap they feel they provide to their subordinates, which involves significant investment. For example, Natalie describes her responsibility as a commander:

“I say: Okay, if there is no pension, it is not worth staying, then I will discharge. Why 24/7? [...] Why am I –in my eighth month [of pregnancy], about to give birth– driving at 200 km/h because my soldier is about to commit suicide in the unit, and only I can save him because there is no one else! Why do I need this?”

Natalie’s words highlight the gap in command expectations. She wants her commanders to see and respond to her needs and difficulties, such as easing her workload during pregnancy. Still, despite this not happening, she consistently demonstrates commitment to the soldiers and the organization’s missions and identifies with them.

Lea describes an organizational and value-based expectation gap: “Do we encourage people based on outputs or hours? [...] Do you cooperate with the organizational culture of ‘leaving the light on in the office to show that you are working,’ or do you do your work in your hours [...] under the best conditions for me?”

Simultaneously, there is an expectation for change. The expectation is that the army, which demands immense personal sacrifices, will adopt an organizational culture that rewards people with families and allows flexibility in working hours for many who are also forced to continue working at night from home. This expectation is echoed and addressed to some extent in the community, as Neta describes:

“But let’s say some issue arises, something is missing, that there is not enough strength for someone alone to speak about it in the office, in the unit, and... because they only think about it individually, and then in the community suddenly she sees that there are other people like her, and then out of this desire they manage to break through something new.”

She continues describing the community as encouraging taking responsibility for the service experience, such as adopting an assertive stance with commanders upon returning from maternity leave:

“[There are] those who find it very difficult to express themselves in front of their commanders and to put them in their place or to explain things to them [...], and the community gives strength to something that you would not have dared to do [...]. I recommend, for example, returning to service [from maternity leave] in the middle of the week [...] to ease the return [...]. I want to give them the legitimacy to feel comfortable with it. I expect them to have personal conversations with their commanders when they return [...] [not to wait] for the commander to come and say, ‘I understand that you are on maternity leave; it’s okay for you to re-enter gradually.’”

From these discussions, we can see the community’s role as both a support structure and a catalyst for the development of assertiveness among its members in seeking practical change. The community network bridges the expectation gap between the system and the individual and fosters coping practices and negotiation with commanders.

The interviews and focus groups show that the expectation gap is not uniform. Younger permanent servicewomen, at a critical stage in their careers, call for the organization to address their professional well-being, including motherhood. At the same time, older women generally have lower expectations from the army. Additionally, younger women seek more community support and guidance than their older counterparts.

Although the community discourse provides tailored advice that emphasizes the soldiers’ welfare over the system’s benefit, it also includes a demand for a civilian outlook and comparison to the working public outside the army, as Nira, a senior community member, states: “I am from the generation that says, ‘Guys [...] start working, so at least you can look in the eyes of that guy from high-tech and tell him at forty-two, [when] you’re getting a pension, tell him you haven’t seen your home for twenty years, [...] part of your justifications will be your active hours, your limitless giving, the operations you participated in, [...] during COVID when everyone was sitting at home and you were working.’”

She also speaks about a value shift in the perception of the relationship between the military and society in Israel, as well as the younger generation’s willingness to change career paths. This trend exists outside the military too where younger employees are more likely to seek new employment opportunities than the older generation that stuck to their employers: “I'm not sure that the young girls in Wonder Women even deal with this [loyalty to a permanent workplace]." According to her, if the work allows them to make a decent living, they stay, and if the conditions are not good enough, they leave.

## Gender Gap

The participants adopt two main approaches: according to the first approach, pregnancy and motherhood can negatively affect a military career path. According to the second approach, professional growth and family responsibilities can coexist harmoniously. Mia describes this issue:

"When a woman reaches the age of twenty-seven to twenty-eight [...], she needs to choose between... between the ability to expand a family, to get married, and to continue in two or three roles [...] [usually far from home], so that she arrives with the same [...] arsenal of roles to compete for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel with the male Major."

In practice, although it is ostensibly inappropriate to ask an employee if she is pregnant or planning to become pregnant, the question does occur in the interview room. It can be justified by the impact of maternity leave on routine workloads and meeting emergency readiness and fitness goals. In the shadow of this argument for men’s advantage in the system, Miriam talks about the community's help in providing alternatives for balancing motherhood and career:

“They bring up efficiency proposals that they didn't think to raise in the usual ways [...] It puts the focus of permanent service mothers on how to combine the very demanding military career with the very demanding maternal career [...] In these issues, the personal aspect more, women find [...] a place to share, a place of refuge.”

Amid this difficulty, the community enters with support, encouragement, and practical ideas, serving as a growing female force influencing a male-dominated and identified field. Listening and inclusion in the community provide its members with a tailwind and social resilience to continue and act in the system and to be in an active position. As Ilana describes:

“The army is such a male organization. I think that many of the girls there, and specially created this supportive place [...] they put their idols, role models. They put the female gender on the platform [...] This is the female answer to the army’s masculinity [...] to present an experience and a response to some needs that were probably hidden somewhere, and the moment the platform was born, they erupted. And I think it's more than that; it's a flag of change.”

The need to find their place and advantage of women in the organization is expressed in the community in a discourse that is encouraging and presents successes. As Ilana says, the community’s activities cross the virtual space and lead to results in the organizational field, such as the possibility of using accessories for uniforms, such as objects and decorative items, that women have requested for years, a center for exchanging second-hand uniforms, and founding support systems for permanent staff such as a parental and marital counseling center for couples struggling to conceive or who have experienced a stillbirth.

In summary, from the interviews, it emerges that in the issue of the gender gap, the community gives its members recognition for their dual role as professional women in the military and as mothers. Both around the expectation gap and the gender gap, it provides women with a safe space to confront their experiences, offer practical solutions, and develop a dialogue about conceptual flexibility that does not compromise on quality. It provides a sense of belonging and positively influences their professional functioning. A virtual community like this, adopting an inclusive approach through encouragement, transparent information transfer, and recognition of challenges, empowers its members to deal with the organization’s demands and advance their careers.

# Discussion

The Wonder Women community makes a significant contribution symbolically and practically by bridging the gaps identified in the findings regarding the sense of belonging and engagement of women in the organization as career-oriented professional women. The analysis of the community's significance for its members considering the expectations and gender gaps is presented in Table 1. For each of the two gaps, the nature of the gap that the women identify and their practices for coping with these gaps as shaped by the community are indicated.

**Table 1: Gaps in the Feelings of Involvement and Commitment of the Community Women in Relation to the Army and Practices for Coping with Them:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Practice for coping** | **Nature of the Gap** | **The Gap** |
| * Identification of the gap in service experience. * Proactive dialogue with commanders on managing organizational and personal needs. * Acceptance of the systematic change in employment agreements (option to leave the workplace instead of lifetime loyalty). * Suggestion of a partnership between the organization and employees, inherent to the systematic change. | Expectation that commanders understand the difficulties of their subordinates and provide appropriate responses, both emotional and practical when needed. | **Expectation Gap** |
| * Recognition of the existence of the gap and the relative advantages of each gender in the system. * Understanding that the gap is not personal. * Development of negotiation skills for customized results; emphasis on flexible solutions for time and place of work. | * The contradiction between the organization as “the people’s army” with mandatory conscription for all and different conditions and placements according to gender. * Limits to professional advancement in the army for women on account of being required to bear the brunt of the burden of parenthood. | **Gender Gap** |

The gender gap, specifically in promoting women, especially mothers, to senior positions, is a key issue addressed by the Wonder Woman community in the military. This discrimination challenges mothers' ability to fulfill roles and meet requirements under the new permanent model in the military (Dolav & Pedan, 2014). The community aims to mitigate these gaps by providing support and coping strategies, enhancing service experience, and fostering a stronger sense of belonging despite unmet desires for recognition and assistance from commanders and the organization. This initiative reflects an effort to balance 24/7 work dedication with family responsibilities, addressing the unique challenges female military personnel face.

## The Challenge in Reducing the Gaps

From the interviewees’ perspective, despite universal conscription, the organization being “the army of the people,” and the growing trend of integrating women into combat roles in the professional permanent military and the higher ranks, men remain overrepresented at higher ranks, and women continue to be overlooked for promotion. Most enlisted women, even those in permanent military service, serve as combat support in central Israel. They fulfill this role in addition to their traditional roles, even from the military’s point of view, as primary caregivers at home and in the family (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018). Such patriarchal norms allow men to devote more time to their work and cultivate social and professional relationships (Hochschild & Machung, 2022). These norms create an inherent bias in the system that ignores the potential of female soldiers and inhibits their professional growth. Women in the military have noted procedural and distributive injustices limiting their ability to participate in the core of the organization (Patro, 2013; Sarangi & Nayak, 2016). There is a constant tension between their commitment to the domestic and public spheres. The result is the creation of a “glass ceiling” that has been noted by gender researchers (see, for example, Mohammadkhani & Dariush, 2016; Morgan, 2015).

The military system holds traditional views of gender role division while gender awareness and feminism are growing in the Western world, thus increasing the expectation gap between commanders and the military. The women of the Wonder Women community expect their commanders and military authorities to consider them during their child-rearing period, given their many years of commitment before starting a family. They also expect support and fairness in competing for organizational roles while raising a family. According to them, combining parenting with a career is possible, although they understand the price the organization, the family, and they themselves will pay.

A mediating parameter that emerged in the research concerned the generation to which the respondents belonged. This is an important factor to take into account in terms of social-organizational processes. The women in the research can be divided into two generations: the generation before and after the organizational change. The differences between the younger and older community members may stem partly from seniority, contributing to job security and future stability. The ranks of the interviewed veterans are higher (Major and above or senior non-commissioned officers), and they are in more senior roles.

In contrast, younger individuals compete for roles advancing up the ranks to integrate into a service agreement. Achieving a higher rank translates into a more favorable pension upon retirement. Another explanation for the generational gap is the difference in the perception of the well-being of the community members regarding the balance between work and home. The older generation perceives the military as a mission that, after years of investment, yields economic security in retirement. In contrast, the younger generation perceives it as a quality workplace that allows them to develop professionally and achieve personal fulfillment both in family life and, later on, in a second career. The generational gap reflects occupational seniority gaps, but it also expresses a perceptual change: the younger generation's preference for service experience and personal development is a potential for a fresh perspective for the organization itself to re-examine a more ecologically organizational culture for the individual and the organization.

## Community Practices for Reducing the Gaps

The community discourse dynamics reduced the expectation gap between reality and desire in women's perceptions. It was found that community support allows space for open dialogue and assists in negotiating the gaps between women’s expectations and their experiences in the military. While the military as an employer provides a salary, challenges, interests, and values, the community provides emotional-social nourishment in the form of a safe space for women to vent, discuss challenging topics, consult with one another, and engage in coping practices. The community meets a social need for broad consensus and social recognition from people with similar experiences (Dei & van der Walt, 2020). Similar to the claims of Partima Sarangi and Bagirathi Nayak (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016), the analysis in this study also shows that all of these factors significantly affect the feeling of security and competence at work. Hence, in this process, the community strengthens women’s commitment to the military despite their institutional challenges.

This phenomenon created a sense of empowerment among the community members who share common ground. The “community together” in virtual communication was expressed by detailing experiences and expressing subjective and reflexive perceptions of personal fulfillment from the experience. The activity in the virtual community contributes to mutual understanding, collaboration, and shared meaning in social media interactions (Delgado et al., 2021; Dubé et al., 2006). The millennial generation tends to share its experiences more quickly online than previous generations (van Laar et al., 2020), and it seems that the use of this social media not only met needs but also created a new need for further involvement both in the community and the military.

Moreover, professional and gender mentoring in the community circle improved the coping skills of the community members with challenges. This is similar to findings from a study that surveyed a community of cardiologist women on Twitter (Chandra et al., 2021) and a study focused on the skills of 21st-century workers and their contribution to the organization (van Laar et al., 2020).

## The Power of Community in an Organization

The inclusive environment of the Wonder Women community enhances the social capital of each member and the community as a whole. The military has recognized the advantages of communities in general and the specific benefits of the Wonder Women community in particular, adopting some of the community’s practical ideas intended to improve the quality of life of the permanent servicewomen. This reflects the military’s openness to the presence of an independent virtual community, publicly displaying various levels of involvement and affiliation with the organization. This process also has advantages for the military itself. Such diversity can promote a dynamic and adaptable workforce better equipped to face the military's complex and evolving challenges (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Combining experience and fresh perspectives can lead to innovative solutions and cultivate a learning environment where members can benefit from the strengths of accumulated information and knowledge.

Another advantage of such a virtual community within the organization is its role as a social, ideological, and practical catalyst. Social capital and civic engagement grow when virtual communities engage in general community information exchanges and provide opportunities for organizational and political participation (Blanchard & Horan, 2000). The community’s desire to spread its message and knowledge is done in leisure time and contributes to other communities (He & Bar-Shindler, 2022). The sharing of knowledge and experience in the Wonder Women community is related to the social capital growing from its memberships, extending into the community space, and based on its network structure. This means that a diversity of roles, ranks, and ages is represented within the community, thus representing a broad spectrum of the military service population. Therefore, although community members are cautious about crossing organizational boundaries, a factor also addressed by Brent Jesiek et al. (2018), and most of their activities are intra-community, it appears to be a golden opportunity for the military to adopt products that can serve as a basis for organizational-level thinking.

All this raises the need for organizational learning and managerial flexibility on the part of the organization to maximize the potential for creativity, problem-solving skills, and employee collaboration (van Laar et al., 2020). It has also been found that policies supporting employee well-being can improve retention rates, reduce burnout, and prevent frequent workforce turnover (Kismono & Hanggarawati, 2022; Suomäki et al., 2019), a phenomenon currently occurring among professionals in the military following changes in employment arrangements brought by the new service model (Almog et al., 2021). According to the interviewees, attrition, expressed in the departure or discharge of skilled permanent staff, leads to workloads that influence the quality of outcomes.

## The Mediating Effects of the Community

Understanding the community’s contribution to its members involves questioning the overall success of Wonder Women. The power of the community is manifested in the number of women who joined it in response to a need. Still, its ability to effect change and influence within the military organization primarily depends on the system’s response and its prevailing norms.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to the world of work (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Hakanen et al., 2019), and the #MeToo movement marked a significant shift in social norms regarding gender relations in the workplace (Moser & Branscombe, 2022; Pass & Ridgway, 2022). These seismic shifts in workplace culture have driven changes regarding the balance between work and leisure, including implementing policies and practices that promote a healthy and sustainable work environment as another way to improve overall job satisfaction, well-being, and retention (Lian & Yoon 2020; Moser & Branscombe, 2022). All these have created a shift in perceptions of well-being and engagement, striving to achieve organizational goals, and in the case under discussion, have contributed to the relevance and strengthening of the Wonder Women community.

## The Novelty of the Study and its Limitations

This empirical article offers innovations in the field of research connecting a virtual community to a military organization by examining the organizational contribution a non-formal virtual community makes to the organization. Similarly to the findings of research on employee commitment to institutional goals in mission-based organizations (Hakanen et al., 2019; O’Mahony et al., 2017), the women of the Wonder Women community demonstrate consistent commitment to the organization, their peers among the military personnel, and organizational tasks in their statements. Their expectation that their commanders “see them” and attend to their needs and difficulties as women in the system is met in the alternative virtual community of peers, which, according to them, offers not only the chance to be listened to, reinforcement, and support but also practical solutions in the form of useful information, knowledge, and helpful advice for the individual and ideas for organizational improvement. This dynamic is essential for developing an organizational culture of employee engagement (Patro, 2013), highlighting the unique position of the community within the organization and its impact on it.

However, unlike the findings of other studies (Banihani et al., 2013) that in civilian organizations, the involved employees unopposedly enlist in the organization’s goals, the Wonder Women community implements Delanty’s cultural-normative model (Delanty, 2012): Acting from political awareness, it enlists its members in collective action. Alongside enlistment and commitment to the role and organization, its members expect proper attention and the adoption of a rewarding organizational culture suited to their dual roles as permanent service women and mothers, with the community actively working in this regard. Although the research focuses on a military organization, the extent of a virtual community’s influence on the organization is relevant to many workplaces today, hence the importance of the research.

The qualitative research method, involving conversations with community managers and open questions collected from community members who chose to respond, is one of the current study’s limitations, as it relies on the subjective interpretation of the researchers. Future research could examine virtual women’s communities in other organizations to see if generational gaps in belonging and involvement exist and how they are expressed. The researchers’ position as former permanent service women contribute to a close familiarity with the field but also requires awareness to maintain research distance in analyzing the findings.

# Summary

Wonder Women is an informal virtual community based on WhatsApp and Facebook, consisting of women with military careers. The community’s visible role in addressing the needs of female commanders in the permanent military has resonated in similar military communities and the broader world of virtual communities in Israel.

This empirical qualitative research reveals that women’s service experience is influenced by organizational changes such as the new permanent service program (Dolev & Pedan, 2014; Locker et al., 2015). Their determination to face these challenges, as evident in the community discourse, contributes to their members’ sense of belonging and involvement in the military organization. The community empowers them as individuals and as a professional and commanding group in a predominantly male organization. The findings indicate that the community normalizes feelings of frustration and loneliness among the women, advising them on coping practices with professional challenges and creating a personally tailored balance between home, family, and work. It mentors them in this regard, contributes to the military organization with communication initiatives and suggestions for improvement, assists specific population groups within the community, and more.

The findings show that the women’s functional proactivity as individuals and, especially, as a community creates an ecological, social system tailored to their needs. It serves as a multi-generational space for mentoring and creativity, allowing them to affect a more assertive stance towards the command and the military organization. In this way, the community members strengthen an organizational-military culture that includes a sense of belonging and involvement of diverse populations.

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