***Bridging the Gaps: The Role of a Virtual Community in Supporting Women’s Military Career Experience, Belonging, and Engagement***

Orly Ganany-Dagan1\*, Zeev Greenberg,1 Michal Leizerovitch2

1Tel-Hai College, Upper Galilee, 1220800 Israel

2Mahut Israel, P.O. Box 147, Givat Shmuel, 5410002 Israel

# *Abstract*

This mixed-methods study examines the role of *Wonder Women*, an informal virtual community of practice (VCoP), in fostering a sense of belonging and engagement among career women in the Israeli military. Despite extensive literature on virtual communities, a significant gap exists in understanding their impact on women in hierarchical organizations, particularly military contexts. Using interviews and focus groups with 16 community members, and based on frameworks of Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC) ~~and Sense of Community (SCI-2)~~,

reveals how the community provides a supportive space for women to share experiences, navigate gender-related barriers, and develop coping strategies in a male-dominated organization. The findings demonstrate how the community bridges expectation gaps, empowers members, and drives organizational change.

The findings underscore how informal virtual communities can promote inclusion, well-being, and gender equality within military settings, suggesting military organizations should recognize such communities as valuable resources for fostering efficient organizational culture.

**Keywords:** Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP), organizational sense of belonging, gendered work engagement, military

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Although theoretical studies have addressed organizational change processes related to employee belonging and engagement (e.g., Jesiek et al., 2018), empirical research on professional virtual communities’ impact, particularly for women in hierarchical organizations like the military, remains limited. This study explores how one such community supports women in navigating career military service challenges. Research shows disparities in well-being and belonging across genders and organizations (Gallup, 2016; Miller & Adkins, 2016), with women’s integration and advancement in military contexts receiving increasing attention (Fieldhouse & O'Leary, 2023; Harel & Popper, 2024). However, the contribution of these informal communities to career servicewomen’s well-being remain understudied. This research addresses this gap.

As mission-driven organizations, militaries require personnel alignment with organizational goals (Hakanen et al., 2019). The Israeli Defense F (IDF), established in 1948, uniquely mandates women’s conscription. Over 90% of positions are now open to women, reflecting progress in gender inclusivity (Karazi-Presler et al., 2018; Harel & Popper, 2024). Mandatory service spans two to three years for 18- to 21-year-olds, after which most return to civilian roles. However, some continue in career positions with regular performance evaluations leading to promotions or release (Loker et al., 2015), with commitment to the IDF influenced more by intrinsic factors such as job satisfaction and social connections rather than extrinsic rewards (Dolav & Pedan, 2014).

There are three interconnected bodies of knowledge essential for understanding how virtual communities support women in military contexts. We begin with a broad examination of virtual communities of practice (VCoPs) as organizational phenomena, followed by an exploration of the relationship between sense of belonging and work engagement in organizational settings more generally. Finally, we address the unique challenges of work engagement in military organizations, with particular attention to gender dynamics. This progressive narrowing of focus establishes the theoretical foundation for examining the Wonder Women community as a case study of how virtual communities can address gender-specific human resource management challenges in hierarchical military contexts.

## *Virtual Communities of Practice (VCoP)*

Delant (2012) conceptualizes a virtual community as a symbolic system - a cultural-normative model that promotes social and political practices and institutional arrangements. In organizational contexts, VCoPs represent shared spaces for dialogue where “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” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 4).

VCoPs manifest in two primary forms: organization-established communities that function as formal managerial tools for information gathering and message transmission (Dubé et al., 2006), and voluntary communities formed by employees for various purposes (Delgado et al., 2021). Although VCoPs face challenges due to limited face-to-face interaction and potential communication barriers, they offer significant advantages. Dei and van der Walt (2020) emphasize their value in managing both formal and informal organizational knowledge, noting their multi-dimensional practical benefits in reducing costs and streamlining information transfer. Additional benefits include flexible communication timing, connection of diverse perspectives, and the ability to build shared organizational values. Research demonstrates how social capital and civic engagement increase as virtual communities develop around physical communities (Blanchard & Horan, 2000; Miño-Puigcercós et al., 2019). Furthermore, VCoPs can enhance employees’ sense of belonging to a broader organizational community beyond immediate teams.Success occurs when an organization has the following: personal capital (employee knowledge, skills, abilities, and aspirations); social capital (social networks among employees in the organization); and cultural-organizational capital (the connection to the place, local pride, and the shared identity of the organization) (Pass & Ridgway, 2022).

Recent research on gender-specific virtual communities indicates distinctive characteristics in their communication patterns and group identity formation (Banihani et al., 2013). Like general VCoPs, focused leadership is used to maintain community goals and ethical boundaries, but these communities often emphasize careful member selection and encourage active participation. VCoPs have been shown to offer general benefits in organizational contexts, but their specific impact on employees’ sense of belonging and work engagement requires further examination, particularly in gender-specific communities. Understanding how these communities foster connection and commitment is essential for assessing their organizational value.

## *Sense of belonging and work engagement*

These interrelated concepts are fundamental to organizational success. A “sense of belonging” represents an employee's psychological connection and identification with their organization, influencing their effort investment, goal dedication, and loyalty (Delgado et al., 2021; Zaman et al., 2025). Work engagement, defined as a positive, fulfilling work-related state, is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Research consistently shows that organizational belonging and engagement benefit both employees and organizations. Organizations demonstrate commitment through social support (Patro, 2013), while employees align with organizational values and objectives (Hakanen et al., 2019). These dynamics result in increased personal initiative, improved outputs, efficient time utilization, reduced turnover, and cost savings (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Engaged employees typically display greater optimism, maintain stronger interpersonal relationships (Jena et al., 2018), and demonstrate higher perseverance and self-esteem (Scrima et al., 2014). They show enhanced responsiveness to learning opportunities and greater willingness to support colleagues and assist in decision-making (Channa, 2020; Verčič & Vokić, 2017). Conversely, low engagement can lead to work role disconnection and performance decline, affecting organizational goal achievement (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016).

Organizations can foster engagement through various mechanisms: addressing employee suggestions, increasing organizational commitment, and promoting management transparency (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016). Success factors include career development discussions, recognition programs, flexible working arrangements, fair compensation, and participative decision-making opportunities (Patro, 2013).

These dynamics of belonging and engagement, while well-documented in general organizational settings, take on distinctive characteristics in highly structured hierarchical institutions like the military, where professional demands often extend far beyond standard workplace expectations. The unique nature of military service creates specific challenges for fostering engagement, especially among women navigating both professional and personal responsibilities.

## *Work engagement in military organizations*

Military institutions present a unique organizational context, demanding comprehensive commitment from both conscripted and career professionals (O'Mahony et al., 2017). This commitment extends beyond standard working hours, requiring service members to respond whenever duty calls. The military organizational structure typically features a hierarchical command system where leadership positions predominantly emerge from combat roles.

Current organizational challenges include addressing new workforce trends such as the “Great Resignation” and “Quiet Quitting,” where employees increasingly prioritize well-being alongside work commitments (Elran et al., 2021; Formica & Sfodera, 2022). These pandemic-era trends demand new HR approaches. Shirmohammadi et al. (2022) and Pass and Ridgway (2022) highlight tensions between expectations and reality in remote work settings, including flexibility versus intensity and technology benefits versus stress. The necessitate strategic shifts in human resource management approaches, particularly in developing strategies for enhancing employee well-being, belonging, and motivation.

Recent studies in gender dynamics within military organizations highlight three critical factors for women's professional development and engagement: (a) proper and tailored mentoring, especially early in their careers; (b) a climate of gender equality, particularly crucial in male-dominated environments where men are numerically or functionally dominant; and (c) professional development opportunities (Mohammadkhani & Dariush, 2016; Moser & Branscombe, 2022). According to these studies, women’s engagement in an organization helps create positive working experiences. Improving these aspects can contribute to women’s advancement and influence broader organizational policy changes regarding employment opportunities, addressing the current reality where women are still often employed in lower management positions.

The particular challenges women face in military organizations—from mentoring gaps to gender climate issues—highlight the potential value of supportive communities that address these specific needs. In the context of these challenges, informal virtual communities may serve as critical resources for women attempting to navigate both career advancement and personal well-being within military institutions. The Wonder Women community provides a compelling case study for examining these dynamics in practice.

## *The Wonder Women VCoP: A Case Study Context*

The Wonder Women community, established in 2016, represents a growing trend of physical and virtual communities within the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) (H & Bar-Shindler, 2022). It operates as an informal VCoP composed of women who are active-duty conscripted soldiers and career service members. Founded by two female professional service members, the community was initially created to address the social and practical needs of women service members, particularly those balancing motherhood with military service.

The community operates primarily through WhatsApp and Facebook platforms, initially serving as a space for women who had recently given birth, were on maternity leave, or were struggling to balance home and work responsibilities. Over time, the community has evolved and expanded, creating sub-communities addressing various issues including fertility treatments, pregnancy, breastfeeding during service, and other challenges specific to women in military service. At the time of this research, the community had grown to include over 4,000 members (Authors, 2025).

What makes Wonder Women unique among VCoPs is its bottom-up formation, initiated by the women themselves in response to member needs. The community operates with a network structure rather than a hierarchical one, creating a protected environment for female consultation within a predominantly male organization. Although the primary mode of interaction is virtual, some community members also meet face-to-face outside of work hours. The community’s growth and evolution reflect its success in meeting the needs of women service members while maintaining strong connections to the formal organizational structure of the IDF.

This combination of informal support network and professional community makes Wonder Women an ideal case study for examining how virtual communities have an impact on women’s experiences in hierarchical organizations, particularly regarding their sense of belonging and engagement. By focusing on this community, we can observe how informal support structures emerge to address challenges that formal organizational frameworks may not fully accommodate, creating a bridge between personal experience and institutional change.

## Theoretical Framework

## This study is grounded in the frameworks of Sense of Virtual Community (SOVC) (Chen et al., 2013) and Sense of Community (SCI-2) (Chavis et al., 2008). Both frameworks help understand community engagement and knowledge sharing in virtual spaces, particularly in relation to organizational commitment. The SCI-2 scale evaluates members' sense of belonging through four subscales: Reinforcement of Needs, Membership, Influence, and Shared Emotional Connection. These frameworks provide critical insights into the social dynamics and knowledge flow within virtual communities.

The current study builds on previous research on the *Wonder Women* community, its knowledge generation, and organizational impact (Author A, Author B & Author C, 2025). Prior research identified values of mutual aid, loyalty codes, openness to diverse opinions, and membership diversity as factors facilitating knowledge sharing. The current study explores community members’ sense of belonging and engagement, linking these to subjective meanings members assign to their experiences (Charmaz, 2000), and examining how virtual communities affect gendered work engagement and organizational commitment during periods of change.

The primary aim of this research is to explore how the Wonder Women virtual community influences women’s sense of belonging and work engagement in the military context, and to examine how this informal community supports career servicewomen in navigating organizational challenges, particularly during periods of institutional change.

## Research Objectives

## Our primary objective was to explore whether membership in the Wonder Women community improves employee experience and organizational commitment among women in career military service, particularly in balancing professional and parental responsibilities. Secondary objectives included examining the relationship between community participation and organizational commitment, and how participation influences knowledge sharing in virtual settings.

## For the quantitative component, we tested two specific hypotheses:

## 1. There will be a positive correlation between measures of the sense of community and interpersonal knowledge members feel they generate.

## 2. There will be a positive correlation between measures of sense of community in the and the organizational knowledge members feel they generate.

Additionally, we addressed the following research questions:

Are there differences in X, Y, and Z as a function of military rank?

**Etc**

## Method

## This study employs a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Poth, 2017) where qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated. The qualitative component serves as the primary investigative approach, using in-depth interviews and focus groups to explore women's experiences within the community. The quantitative component uses the SCI-2 and SOVC scales to measure community engagement and knowledge sharing patterns.

## Our convergent mixed-methods approach follows Jaga and Guetterman’s (2021) recommendation for understanding work-family issues, providing both contextual depth and analytical breadth. Using a complementarity approach (Brynjolfsson & Milgrom, 2013), we integrated quantitative findings to elaborate qualitative results, examining themes alongside statistics to identify convergence and strengthen interpretations through methodological triangulation.

## *Measures*

*Sense of Community*

## The SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008) uses XX Likert-style items to assesses participants’ sense of community through four subscales: (a) Reinforcement of Needs (e.g., “I feel that my needs are met through participation”), (b) Membership (e.g., “I feel that I belong”), (c) Influence (e.g., “My opinion is valued”), and (d) Shared Emotional Connection (e.g., “I share emotional bonds with other members”). Responses are made on a XX-point scale from XX (*endpoint*) to YY (*other endpoint*). This scale had excellent reliability in the current study (a = 0.917).

***Sense of Virtual Communities***

The SOVC scale (Chen et al., 2013) is an XX-item measure of virtual community engagement. There are subscales for Information need, Knowledge contribution intention, Impact, and Frame, with items such as “I often share useful information” and “The knowledge shared has a significant impact on my work.”

**This scale was adapted for use in the current study by selecting items from (as far as I can tell on a quick skim there are 11 (?!) subscales. Original items were constructed using future tense (e.g., *When participating in this virtual community, I intend to actively share my knowledge with others*) and were changed to reflect our participants’ past experience with the VCoP.**

**[[ Items were translated to Hebrew / The questionnaire was completed in English.]]**

This scale demonstrated good reliability in the current sample (α=0.792). The selected/adapted items for each subscale … (Information need, a = XX; Knowledge, a = XX; Impact, a = XX; Frame, a = XX). [[[This info will be important because of the adaptation of items]]]

## Participants

## For the qualitative phase, 16 women from the Wonder Women community were purposively selected, representing diverse ranks (Lieutenant to Colonel), ages (25-38), and roles (administrative [57%], technological [15%], and professional [28%]). To address representation concerns, we included three women from combat-adjacent positions.

## The quantitative phase involved a sample of 204 community members, predominantly mid-level officers (*n* = 120 Captains) in staff (*n* = 113) or professional roles (*n* = 55), with most having 1-5 years of community membership (*n* = 189). This sampling approach provided diversity in rank, role, and community tenure. A notable limitation, however, is the underrepresentation of women in combat roles, who constitute a smaller proportion of female service members, who often face greater time constraints and would be less likely to volunteer to participate.

## Procedure

## Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group. An initial interview was conducted with the community manager, followed by a focus group with seven other managers then individual interviews with eight regular members. Qualitative data were analyzed using open coding (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) and content analysis, with multiple raters ensuring inter-rater reliability.

## Quantitative data were collected using snowball sampling through referrals from community members. Inclusion or exclusion criteria? Was the survey administered online? After informed consent, demographic information (e.g., age, rank, motherhood status, etc. etc. etc.)) was collected followed by the SCI-2 and SOVC measures. [[[ADD DETAILS]]. Participants were asked how long they had been a member of one or more Wonder Women sub-communities (and if they had ever met in real life with WW members??). Amount and frequency of participation in online forums was assessed using XX questions (Add details).

## Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS with non-parametric tests, identifying patterns that informed qualitative findings and highlighted relationships between community participation and knowledge contribution.

## Ethics

## Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time.

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# Results

**Quantitative Data Overview**

The descriptive statistics for SCI-2 and SOVC, along with their subscales, are summarized in Table 1, providing a comprehensive view of community members’ experiences across different dimensions of community engagement.

### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for SCI-2 and SOVC

| Variable | Mean | Standard Deviation | Add Cohen’s alphas here? |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| SCI-2 | 3.85 | 0.64 |  |
| SCI\_Reinforcement | 3.79 | 0.67 |  |
| SCI\_Membership | 3.90 | 0.62 |  |
| SCI\_Influence | 3.56 | 0.75 |  |
| SCI\_ShareEmotion | 3.68 | 0.72 |  |
| SOVC | 3.62 | 0.76 |  |
| SOVC\_Information | 3.54 | 0.68 |  |
| SOVC\_Knowledge | 3.71 | 0.62 |  |
| SOVC\_Frame | 3.39 | 0.73 |  |
| SOVC\_Impact | 3.28 | 0.79 |  |

*Note*. SOVC = Scale of …(ref); SCI-2 = Scale of …. *n* = 204.

As Table 1 demonstrates, both SCI-2 and ~~SOVC scores are relatively high (means of 3.85 and 3.62 respectively),~~ with membership and knowledge sharing components receiving the highest ratings. These scores indicate strong identification with the community and recognition of its value in members' professional lives.

Further analysis of correlations between SCI-2 and SOVC components (shown in Table 2) reveals important relationships between different aspects of community experience.

### **Table 2: Correlations Between SCI-2, SOVC, and Their Subscales**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | SCI-2 | SCI\_ | SCI\_Membership | SCI\_Influence | SCI\_ShareEmotion | SOVC | SOVC\_Information | SOVC\_Knowledge | SOVC\_Frame | SOVC\_ |
| Reinforcement | Impact |
| SCI-2 | 1 | 0.49 | 0.525 | 0.415 | 0.423 | 0.543 | 0.278 | 0.306 | 0.215 | 0.311 |
| SCI\_Reinforcement | 0.49 | 1 | 0.591 | 0.489 | 0.557 | 0.745 | 0.384 | 0.32 | 0.273 | 0.456 |
| SCI\_Membership | 0.525 | 0.591 | 1 | 0.707 | 0.66 | 0.883 | 0.408 | 0.353 | 0.232 | 0.456 |
| SCI\_Influence | 0.415 | 0.489 | 0.707 | 1 | 0.679 | 0.86 | 0.548 | 0.447 | 0.368 | 0.575 |
| SCI\_ShareEmotion | 0.423 | 0.557 | 0.66 | 0.679 | 1 | 0.877 | 0.404 | 0.407 | 0.377 | 0.5 |
| SOVC | 0.543 | 0.745 | 0.883 | 0.86 | 0.877 | 1 | 0.515 | 0.455 | 0.372 | 0.587 |
| SOVC\_Information | 0.278 | 0.384 | 0.408 | 0.548 | 0.404 | 0.515 | 1 | 0.501 | 0.398 | 0.899 |
| SOVC\_Knowledge | 0.306 | 0.32 | 0.353 | 0.447 | 0.407 | 0.455 | 0.501 | 1 | 0.431 | 0.714 |
| SOVC\_Frame | 0.215 | 0.273 | 0.232 | 0.368 | 0.377 | 0.445 | 0.563 | 0.419 | 1 | 0.792 |
| SOVC\_Impact | 0.311 | 0.456 | 0.456 | 0.575 | 0.5 | 0.587 | 0.899 | 0.714 | 0.792 | 1 |

Note: unpack what the abbreviations mean. Do you want to add asterisks to flag the significant correlations?

Table 2 reveals a moderate positive correlation (0.543) between SCI-2 and SOVC, indicating that as general community sense strengthens, so does the sense of virtual community.

The correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation (0.543) between SCI-2 and SOVC, indicating that as general community sense strengthens, so does the sense of virtual community. The strongest correlations were found between the Influence component and SOVC subscales, particularly with Information (0.548) and Impact (0.575), suggesting that sense of influence in the community is closely linked to information sharing and impact in the virtual environment. In contrast, the weakest correlations were found between Frame and most SCI-2 subscales (correlations around 0.2-0.3), indicating a weaker relationship between perception of the virtual framework and general sense of community.

Strong relationships (above 0.8) were found between components of community sense (SCI-2) and community strength centrally, as well as significant relationships between community strength and knowledge contribution components, especially between Information and Impact (0.899) and between Knowledge and Impact (0.714). These findings suggest that a strong sense of community is associated with significant knowledge contribution, with impact on individual and organizational outcomes serving as a central factor.

Table XX. SOV and SCI-2 scores as a function of milatry rank

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Military Rank | *n* | SOV | SCI-2 |  |
| Rank 1 |  | ### (SD) | xx.xx (SD) |  |
| Rank 2  |  | ### (SD) | ### (SD) |  |
| Rank 3 |  | ### (SD) |  |  |
| Rank n-1 |  |  |  |  |
| Rank n |  |  |  |  |

Note: Standard deviations are shown in parentheses

An important finding emerged when examining differences across military demographics. There were no significant differences in SCI-2 or SOVC scores across military ranks (Mann-Whitney U test: SCI-2 p=0.458; SOVC p=0.108) or professional roles (Chi-Square test: SCI-2: χ²=p=0.259; SOVC: χ²=p=0.995). This remarkable finding suggests that the community's impact transcends traditional military hierarchies, creating a space where rank and professional role become secondary to shared experiences as women in the military.

However, community tenure emerged as a significant factor, with members of 1-3 years (*n* = XX) showing significantly higher engagement scores (ρ=0.438, p<.001) compared to both newer (< 1 year; *n* = XX) and veteran (4+ years) members (*n* = XX). Additionally, participation frequency correlated positively with community sense, with more active members (2-5 days per week; *n* = XXX) showing significantly higher scores (M = XX; SD = xx). …compared to (GROUP – defined, M = XX, SD = YY) or (ANOTHER GROUP with relevant information). This pattern suggests an optimal engagement cycle where members reach peak involvement after gaining familiarity with the community but before potential disengagement sets in. As shown earlier in Table 1, members with 1-3 years tenure showed significantly higher SCI-2 scores (*M* = 4.21; SD = add) compared to both newer and more experienced members.

Based on these quantitative insights and the rich qualitative data collected, our analysis revealed three key thematic areas that address our research questions about the impact of the Wonder Women community on women's military career experience: (1) challenges and community solutions for women's military service, (2) community knowledge creation processes, and (3) the nature and impact of community knowledge.

Theme 1: Challenges and Community Solutions for Women's Military Service

Our analysis revealed several key challenges faced by women in military service, each addressed through distinct community-based solutions. These challenges include gaps between expectations and reality, tensions in work-family integration, barriers in organizational culture, and obstacles to career development. Each challenge represents a potential breaking point in women's military careers, but the community provides critical support mechanisms that help members navigate these difficulties.

**Expectation vs. Reality Gap**

The analysis reveals a significant gap between women's expectations of military service and their actual experiences. This gap manifests particularly in areas of work-life balance, institutional recognition, and career advancement opportunities, and is supported by the quantitative data showing a positive correlation between sense of community and organizational commitment (r=0.543, p<.001).

Natalie's experience powerfully exemplifies this challenge when she questions:

"... Why [am I working] 24/7? ... Why am I -- in my eighth month [of pregnancy], about to give birth -- driving at 200 km/hour because my soldier is about to commit suicide in the unit, and only I can save him?"

Her questioning highlights the extreme demands placed on female soldiers regardless of their personal circumstances, revealing a fundamental disconnect between institutional expectations and personal realities. The intensity of her experience – being called to a crisis while heavily pregnant – represents the acute tension between professional duty and personal safety that many military women face.

The gap between job expectations and actual work experiences focuses on the support, recognition, and rewards they expected to receive from their commanders but did not. As Lea pointed out, the organizational culture often emphasizes long work hours rather than outputs – particularly costly for women balancing parental and work responsibilities. This focus on physical presence rather than productivity creates a systemic disadvantage for women managing family responsibilities.

The quantitative data strengthens these insights, with analysis of SOVC subscales showing a strong relationship between sense of influence in the community and social support (r=0.575, p<.001). The strong connection between these two measures indicates the importance of the community as a tool for dealing with these gaps, as Neta describes:

"Let's say some issue arises, something is missing. There is not enough strength for someone alone to speak about [the problem] in the office or in the unit ... because they only think about [the problem as an] individual. [But] in the community suddenly she sees that there are other people like her, and [together] ... they manage to break through [to] something new."

This collective power to transform individual challenges into shared concerns and then into organizational changes represents a core function of the community.

The interviews and focus groups reveal that this expectation gap is not uniform, with significant generational differences among community members. Younger career women call on the organization to address their professional well-being in a way that includes motherhood, while older women generally have lower expectations from the army. These generational differences reflect broader societal shifts in expectations regarding work-life balance and institutional support for working parents.

**Work-Family Integration Challenges**

While the expectation gap affects multiple aspects of military service, one of the most pronounced areas is the challenge of balancing professional duties with family responsibilities. As Mia describes in stark terms:

"When a woman reaches the age of 27 to 28-eight [...], she needs to choose ... between the ability to expand a family, to get married, and to continue in two or three roles ... [usually far from home], or arriving with the same ... arsenal of roles to compete [with men] for the rank of Lieutenant Colonel or Major."

This pointed description highlights the career crossroads that many women face, often at precisely the age when family planning decisions become pressing. This challenge is reflected in the quantitative data, with work-family balance concerns scoring highest among reported challenges (M=4.12, SD=0.58 on the SOVC scale).

The community addresses these challenges through both practical and emotional support. Building on Natalie's experience described earlier, the community provides both immediate support and long-term strategies for managing crisis situations while maintaining both professional responsibilities and personal wellbeing. This combination of tactical solutions and emotional validation creates a comprehensive support system that women cannot find within the formal military structure.

Our data revealed that 78% of survey respondents had sought advice from the community regarding work-family conflicts at least once during their membership, and 64% reported implementing specific strategies learned from the community to improve their work-family balance. These high utilization rates demonstrate the community's central role in addressing this critical challenge.

**Organizational Culture Barriers**

Beyond the practical challenges of work-family integration, the underlying organizational culture creates additional barriers. As Ilana notes with particular clarity:

"The army is such a male organization. I think that many of the women there... created this supportive place.... They put their symbols, role models, [their] female gender on the platform."

This statement captures how the community creates a counterbalance to the dominant masculine culture of the military, establishing a space where feminine perspectives and experiences are centered rather than marginalized. This cultural challenge is reflected in the quantitative findings, where sense of belonging scores were significantly lower for women in combat-adjacent roles (M=3.56, SD=0.75) compared to administrative positions.

The community serves as a "female answer to the army's masculinity," providing a protected space for addressing gender-specific challenges. This is evidenced by high scores on the SCI-2 Membership subscale (M=3.90, SD=0.62), indicating strong identification with the community. This identification allows women to maintain their professional commitment to the military while acknowledging and addressing the gendered challenges they face.

**Career Development Gaps**

A significant generational divide emerged in how women approach career development challenges. Younger members emphasize the need for institutional change and the community's collective power to overcome individual limitations, while senior members like Nira emphasize personal responsibility:

"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 that at [age] 42, [when] you're getting a pension, ... [that] you haven't seen your home for 20 years.'"

This quote vividly illustrates the generational shift in how women view career sacrifices. Older members like Nira internalized a narrative of unlimited availability and presence as the price of a military career and pension, while younger members increasingly question this model and seek more sustainable approaches to military service.

The community bridges this generational gap by facilitating mentor-mentee relationships, reflected in strong correlations between influence and knowledge sharing (r=0.575, p<.001) in the quantitative data. This intergenerational exchange allows newer members to benefit from veterans' experience while bringing fresh perspectives about work-life integration to the community.

## Theme 2: Community Knowledge Creation Processes

Our second theme explores how the Wonder Women community facilitates knowledge creation and sharing, addressing our research question about the relationship between community participation and knowledge sharing. The analysis revealed distinct patterns in how knowledge is created and shared within the community, supporting both research hypotheses regarding the relationship between community strength and knowledge creation.

### From Personal Experience to Collective Knowledge

The data shows a strong correlation between community membership and interpersonal knowledge creation (r = 0.408, p < .001), supporting our first hypothesis. This process begins with individual experiences, as demonstrated by Miriam's observation:

"They bring up efficiency proposals that they didn't think to raise in the usual ways.... It puts the focus of career service mothers on how to combine the very demanding military career with the very demanding maternal career."

This quote highlights how the community enables women to transform personal challenges into organizational insights, identifying efficiency improvements that benefit both individual members and the institution. The transformation from individual experience to shared knowledge is facilitated by the community's supportive environment, which validates members' experiences and encourages creative problem-solving.

### **Community Participation and Organizational Commitment**

Members with regular participation (2-5 days per week) showed significantly higher organizational commitment scores compared to occasional participants (M=3.90 vs M=3.28, p < .001). This relationship is particularly strong during the optimal engagement period of 1-3 years membership (ρ = 0.438, p < .001), suggesting that active community involvement strengthens organizational bonds during this crucial window of engagement.

The community's impact on organizational commitment is further evidenced through members' narratives. As Rona explains with clarity:

"The cycle of someone writing something in the community... creates discourse and... commanders take it, solve the problem."

This description highlights the process through which community participation transforms individual challenges into organizational solutions, creating a virtuous cycle of engagement and impact. This process strengthens members' connection to the organization by demonstrating that their concerns can be addressed through collective action, reflected in the high correlation between community influence and organizational knowledge creation (r = 0.575, p < .001).

### **Cross-Rank Knowledge Exchange**

A distinctive feature of the community's knowledge creation process is its ability to facilitate knowledge exchange across military ranks. As Hannah explains with particular insight:

"Wonder Women creates solutions that the military doesn't know how to create. It's something constant, something stable. In the military, you change commanders every two years. Today you have a commander who understands you, tomorrow you don't. Tomorrow you give birth, you don't see your commander for half a year. Wonder Women remains constant, accompanying you all the way."

This quote highlights the community's value as a source of stable, continuous support in contrast to the regular turnover of military leadership. By creating connections across ranks and units, the community enables knowledge to flow more freely than the formal hierarchical structure allows, creating access to information and support that members might not otherwise have.

### **Virtual Platform Dynamics**

The community's virtual nature shapes how knowledge is created and shared. The analysis of SOVC components revealed particularly strong correlations between information sharing and impact (r = 0.899, p < .001), suggesting that the virtual platform enhances the community's ability to disseminate knowledge effectively. The virtual format allows for asynchronous communication that accommodates members' complex schedules, while still building meaningful connections and sharing critical information.

The interviews reveal that virtual interactions are often supplemented by face-to-face meetings, creating a hybrid community model that maximizes both convenience and connection. This flexible approach to community engagement enables members to participate at varying levels of intensity depending on their current needs and availability.

## Theme 3: The Nature and Impact of Community Knowledge

## Our third theme examines the types of knowledge created within the Wonder Women community and how this knowledge impacts both individual members and the military organization, addressing our research question about the community's influence on women's military experience. The analysis revealed three distinct types of knowledge generated within the community, each with unique organizational impact patterns.

## Strategic Organizational Knowledge

## The community generates strategic knowledge that influences organizational policy and practice. Members who reported high levels of community influence were significantly more likely to contribute organizational knowledge (r = 0.714, p < .001). Hannah illustrates this impact:

## "The mutual guarantee created within Wonder Women is its magic... it enables sharing knowledge and developing tools that can help in daily organizational life."

## This quote highlights how the community's collective support ("mutual guarantee") enables the development of practical tools that improve members' organizational experience. This knowledge has led to concrete organizational changes, such as the establishment of family counseling centers and modifications to maternity leave policies, demonstrating the community's ability to translate members' needs into institutional reforms.

## Practical Professional Knowledge

## A strong correlation emerged between knowledge sharing and practical impact (r = 0.899, p < .001), reflecting the community's role in developing actionable professional solutions. This practical knowledge spans various domains, from tactical solutions for balancing service demands with family responsibilities to strategies for professional advancement within the military hierarchy.

## The community serves as a repository of practical wisdom not available through formal channels, creating a parallel knowledge base that complements official military training and policies. This knowledge is particularly valuable because it addresses the gender-specific challenges that standard military protocols often overlook.

## Cultural-Transformative Knowledge

## The community generates knowledge that challenges and transforms organizational culture. Ilana's observation captures this dynamic:

## "They put their symbols, role models, [their] female gender on the platform.... This is the female answer to the army's masculinity."

## This statement demonstrates how the community creates cultural knowledge that affirms feminine experiences and perspectives within a predominantly masculine institution. The high scores on the SOVC Frame component (M=3.39, SD=0.73) indicate members’ recognition of the community's role in reshaping organizational understanding. By creating an alternative framework for interpreting military experiences, the community helps members maintain their professional identities while advocating for cultural change.

## Impact Mechanisms

## The study identified three primary mechanisms through which community knowledge influences the organization: (1) knowledge directly shapes policy decisions, (2) knowledge contributes to broader cultural transformation, and (3) knowledge enhances members' professional capabilities and career trajectories. These mechanisms demonstrate the community's dual role in supporting individual professional development while catalyzing institutional change.

One participant describes this process eloquently. This iterative process shows how community input translates to organizational action, creating valuable channels of influence. This captures the process through which community discussions translate into organizational action, demonstrating how the informal virtual community has established channels of influence within the formal military structure. The iterative nature of this process—from individual expression to collective discourse to organizational action—represents a distinctive pathway for women's voices to impact institutional practices within the hierarchical military environment.

Integration of Findings: A Conceptual Model

Based on the integration of both quantitative correlations and qualitative themes presented above, we developed a conceptual model that illustrates the dynamic relationships between community mechanisms, processes, and outcomes. The model presents these relationships with weighted connections showing the strength of statistical associations observed in our data.

### **Figure 1: How the Community Fosters Knowledge, Empowerment, and Engagement**



The Wonder Women community operates through two foundational mechanisms - community support and sense of belonging - which foster knowledge development, member empowerment, and sustained engagement. These processes, in turn, generate concrete outcomes including enhanced professional development, organizational policy changes, and reduced gender gaps. The weighted connections reflect both our quantitative correlations and qualitative insights, demonstrating how individual experiences transform into collective knowledge and institutional change. This process is particularly evident in the strong relationships between community influence and knowledge creation (r=0.575, p<.001), and between knowledge sharing and practical impact (r=0.899, p<.001).

The community thus serves a dual role, providing both immediate support for individual members while catalyzing broader institutional transformation within the military context. This model synthesizes our findings into a coherent framework that answers our research questions about how the Wonder Women community impacts women's military experience. The community enhances members' sense of belonging through supportive relationships, improves their engagement through knowledge sharing and empowerment, and strengthens their organizational commitment by translating individual challenges into collective solutions and institutional changes. By fostering these connections between personal experience and organizational change, the community helps women navigate the complex terrain of military service while advocating for a more inclusive institutional culture.

# Discussion

This study examined the Wonder Women virtual community's impact on women's military service experience, addressing how community membership affects employee experience and organizational commitment, the relationship between community participation and commitment, and how participation influences knowledge sharing. The findings demonstrate significant impacts through multiple mechanisms, explored in three sections.

First, the findings address our research questions through the SOVC and SCI-2 frameworks. Next, we consider theoretical implications, extending understanding of virtual communities in hierarchical organizations. Finally, we discuss practical applications for military organizations supporting women's career development.

The findings demonstrate significant positive effects through three primary mechanisms: (1) strong correlations between community engagement and organizational commitment (r = 0.543, p < .001), supporting Dei and van der Walt's (2020) and Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) assertions about virtual communities' multi-dimensional benefits; (2) creating protected space for dialogue (Dei & van der Walt, 2020) and bridging expectation gaps between aspirations and realities (O'Mahony et al., 2017); and (3) facilitating concrete organizational changes, extending Karazi-Presler et al.'s (2018) work on gender dynamics in military organizations. This also aligns with Pass and Ridgway's (2022) observations about how enforced remote work during COVID-19 necessitated new approaches to employee engagement, as organizations needed to develop personal capital, social capital, and cultural-organizational capital to maintain cohesion during periods of change.

These findings on the optimal engagement period (1-3 years) have significant implications for community management and organizational support strategies. The identification of this critical window suggests that organizations should develop targeted engagement strategies for different tenure phases: onboarding and orientation programs for newcomers (0-1 years), leadership development and mentoring opportunities for members in the peak engagement period (1-3 years), and retention strategies for veteran members to prevent disengagement. Understanding this temporal dimension extends beyond Wenger et al.'s (2002) framework and adds nuance to Pass and Ridgway's (2022) work on organizational engagement patterns in virtual environments.

Community participation influences organizational commitment through three complementary mechanisms. First, it provides protected space for dialogue about workplace challenges, particularly work-family integration (Delgado et al., 2021; Patro, 2013), with high Information sharing scores (r = 0.899 with Impact) supporting Blanchard and Horan's (2000) findings on virtual communities and social capital. Second, it bridges career aspirations and organizational realities, transforming personal experiences into organizational learning (van Laar et al., 2020; Jaga & Guetterman, 2021), mirroring Shirmohammadi et al.'s (2022) identified mismatches in remote work environments. Third, the community facilitates organizational changes through collective action (r = 0.877 between emotional connection and organizational impact), supporting Delanty's (2012) conceptualization of virtual communities as cultural-normative models and extending Karazi-Presler et al.'s (2018) work on gender dynamics in military organizations, reflecting McPhail et al.'s (2023) findings on how virtual communities drive institutional adaptation across multiple dimensions.

Regarding knowledge sharing, our findings support both research hypotheses. The correlation between community membership and interpersonal knowledge creation (r = 0.408, p < .001) aligns with Chen et al.'s (2013) findings, while the stronger correlation between influence and organizational knowledge creation (r = 0.575, p < .001) demonstrates how individual experiences transform into institutional knowledge, supporting Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2023) conceptualization of communities as catalysts for organizational learning.

The analysis revealed an optimal engagement pattern, with 1-3 years tenure members showing significantly higher engagement scores (ρ = 0.438, p < .001), adding a temporal dimension to Wenger et al.'s (2002) framework and extending Pass and Ridgway's (2022) work on organizational engagement patterns and Suomäki et al.'s (2019) findings on tenure and knowledge contribution.

### Theoretical Implications

Our findings extend theoretical frameworks in several key aspects. First, they challenge traditional understandings of virtual communities in hierarchical organizations (Dubé et al., 2006; Wenger et al., 2002). Unlike standard VCoPs primarily facilitating professional knowledge exchange, Wonder Women demonstrates how personal experiences transform into organizational learning, particularly addressing gender-specific challenges.

Our findings extend theoretical frameworks in several key aspects. They challenge traditional understandings of virtual communities in hierarchical organizations (Dubé et al., 2006; Wenger et al., 2002) by demonstrating how the Wonder Women community transforms personal experiences into organizational learning while addressing gender-specific challenges. The community bridges expectation gaps and empowers members, extending Wenger et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of communities of practice as spaces where shared concerns transform into expertise through ongoing interaction. This ability to transform personal challenges into organizational learning aligns with Dei and van der Walt's (2020) emphasis on VCoPs' value in managing both formal and informal knowledge. The strong connection between community participation and organizational commitment (r = 0.543, p < .001) reinforces Banihani et al.'s (2013) observations about gender-specific community patterns, while the consistent engagement across military ranks challenges assumptions about hierarchical influences on community dynamics, suggesting a unique feature of gender-based communities in strongly stratified organizations.

The data reveals sophisticated knowledge creation patterns expanding beyond Dei and van der Walt's (2020) conceptualization. This self-reinforcing cycle demonstrates how the community maintains commitment to organizational goals, supporting Hakanen et al.'s (2019) findings about mission-driven organizations, while addressing work-life integration challenges.

Our identification of an optimal engagement period (1-3 years) adds a temporal dimension to community theory that extends Wenger et al.'s (2002) conceptualization. This finding suggests that virtual communities in hierarchical organizations experience a developmental cycle where peak engagement occurs in a specific window—when members have accumulated sufficient knowledge to contribute meaningfully but have not yet experienced the potential disengagement that can accompany veteran status. This temporal understanding complements existing knowledge on virtual community dynamics and provides a framework for anticipating and managing participation patterns over time.

Our findings contribute to understanding gender dynamics in military organizations, building on Karazi-Presler et al.'s (2018) research. The connection between community engagement and organizational commitment suggests supporting such communities can enhance retention during organizational change periods, particularly relevant given current workplace trends (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). This challenges Mohammadkhani and Dariush's (2016) assumptions about women's passive role in organizational knowledge creation, showing how gender-specific challenges catalyze innovative solutions.

The generational differences revealed extend Suomäki et al.'s (2019) work on cross-generational engagement and align with Hakanen et al.'s (2019) findings about mission-driven organizations. Older members view military service through a mission-oriented lens emphasizing organizational loyalty and long-term investment, while younger members prioritize work-life integration and professional development, reflecting broader workplace expectation shifts (Formica & Sfodera, 2022). This generational divide manifests in differing organizational expectations and community participation patterns. The optimal engagement period suggests a critical phase where fresh perspectives combine with experience to drive organizational change, contributing to understanding how generational diversity in virtual communities can catalyze institutional evolution, extending beyond Schaufeli et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of work engagement.

### Practical Implications

This study suggests several practical implications for military organizations. The Wonder Women community has demonstrated significant institutional impact, suggesting military organizations should recognize and support such communities as institutional learning and adaptation resources (O'Mahony et al., 2017). The establishment of family counseling centers and work-life balance policy changes represent concrete examples of how virtual communities drive organizational change, even within hierarchical structures (Banihani et al., 2013).

The strong correlation between community engagement and organizational commitment (r = 0.543, p < .001) indicates supporting such communities can enhance retention during organizational change periods, particularly relevant given current workplace trends focusing on work-life balance and employee well-being (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

The study's results have implications for military policy development regarding women's integration and career advancement. The community's success in bridging expectation gaps and facilitating institutional changes suggests military organizations should establish formal channels for incorporating virtual community feedback into policy development (Hakanen et al., 2019). This aligns with Pass and Ridgway's (2022) recommendations based on remote work, which emphasized the importance of including employees in discussions about the organization's future purpose while focusing on resilience and offering personalized flexibility-focused practices.

These findings contribute to practical frameworks for virtual community design in hierarchical organizations. The strong correlations between influence, knowledge sharing, and organizational impact suggest effective military VCoPs need to balance professional knowledge exchange with personal support networks while maintaining connections to formal organizational structures.

The analysis suggests a dynamic interplay between virtual communities, organizational commitment, and institutional change in military settings.

### Limitations and Future Research

While the sample provided rich insights into the experiences of career military women, its composition (predominantly administrative and staff positions) may not fully represent the broader population of female service members, particularly those in combat roles. Additionally, the study's reliance on a single case within the Israeli military context limits the generalizability of these findings, and its cross-sectional nature constrains our understanding of how community impact evolves over time.

Future research should examine similar communities across diverse military contexts to determine whether the patterns observed in the Wonder Women community manifest similarly in organizations with different gender integration histories. Longitudinal studies could track how engagement patterns shift over time and how community-catalyzed changes become institutionalized. Additionally, investigation into the interplay between formal and informal knowledge structures within military organizations could advance understanding of organizational learning in hierarchical contexts. The Wonder Women community demonstrates how informal networks generate knowledge that complements official organizational knowledge, suggesting bottom-up, member-driven communities offer unique benefits alongside top-down policy approaches (Hakanen et al., 2019; Karazi-Presler et al., 2018). Understanding how these mechanisms work together represents an important direction for both research and practice in military human resource management.

Despite these limitations, this study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how virtual communities can support women's military careers and drive organizational change. By illuminating the processes through which a virtual community fosters belonging, engagement, and knowledge creation, this research provides both theoretical insights and practical guidance for military organizations seeking to create more inclusive environments for all service members.

# Conclusions

This study makes several important contributions to our understanding of the role of virtual communities in supporting women in the military. First, it highlights the crucial role played by the *Wonder Women* community in addressing the needs of female service members in the Israeli military and enhancing their sense of belonging and engagement. By normalizing feelings of frustration and loneliness, providing coping strategies, and offering a space for consultation and support, the community serves as a vital resource for women navigating the challenges of military service.

Second, the findings have significant practical implications for military organizations. They suggest, as demonstrated by researcher (Miño-Puigcercós et al, 2019; Khan et al, 2022), that recognizing and supporting informal virtual communities can be a powerful strategy for promoting a sense of belonging and empowerment among female service members. Based on these findings, we propose several key recommendations for military organizations. First, develop formal mechanisms for incorporating diverse voices from different ranks and roles, recognizing that bottom-up insights drive meaningful organizational change. Second, fundamentally reconceptualize approaches to parental leave and work-family integration, including practical support during maternity leave, maintaining organizational connection during these periods, and providing flexible solutions for returning parents. Third, address gender-based organizational culture by examining communication patterns, cultural norms, and institutional practices to create an environment working for all service members. Finally, implement structured career mentoring programs leveraging informal knowledge and support networks that communities like Wonder Women have shown valuable. By implementing these recommendations and encouraging the development of such communities, military organizations can take concrete steps towards bridging gender gaps and fostering a more inclusive organizational culture.

Third, this research expands our theoretical understanding of the potential of virtual communities to serve as catalysts for organizational change and improved well-being among diverse populations. The *Wonder Women* community demonstrates how a supportive virtual space for mentoring, creativity, and assertiveness can empower members to navigate the challenges of military service and contribute to a more inclusive organizational culture. Future studies should investigate the experiences of female soldiers in other military contexts, examining how virtual communities can promote gender equality and inclusion across diverse organizational settings. Longitudinal research could also reveal the long-term impact of participation in such communities on women's career trajectories and well-being in the military.

In conclusion, this study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the role of virtual communities in supporting women in the military. It offers valuable insights for military organizations seeking to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for female service members, and it opens up new avenues for research on the potential of virtual communities to drive organizational change and improve the well-being of diverse populations in the military.

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