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The perspectives on the understanding and challenges of social work support through the Haredi mothers' lens

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This article has been composed from a larger mixed methods study that explores how Haredi mothers in the United Kingdom experience their motherhood and what they understand by “social work support.” The mixed method study used questionnaires and interviews as its tools in data collection. Thirty Haredi mothers from across the UK’s Haredi communities responded to an online questionnaire and thirteen subsequently took part in an online interview. Mary Douglas’s Group-Grid Cultural theoretical perspectives as well as gender theories’ principles were utilized in data collection and analysis. Findings include an overview of quantified data and a thematic discussion of how Haredi mothers experience their motherhood and what they understand by “social support” and “social work.” Their individual perceptions of social work engagement within the Haredi community are presented with the quotes from the interviews. Motherhood is seen by Haredi mothers as a life’s goal, “a raison d’etre,” and mothers’ experiences are focused around their community and strict religious observance that is transmitted to their children through religious education and traditional rituals. Although social support is seen as welcome but only when absolutely necessary, the social work involvement is seen as problematic. Haredi mothers reported that the lack of cultural sensitivity from social workers is a major barrier. That barrier has tremendous implications for the mothers and whole families, be it further isolation, shame, stigma and helplessness. Haredi mothers voice their views on the need of the cultural sensitivity training and professional curiosity that will help building trust between the insular Haredi and the outside social support services.

Introduction

Haredi or the Ultra-Orthodox are a subdivision of Judaism that is rapidly growing and has reached over 1.8 million members around the world (Flint, 2020). The Haredi population is mainly concentrated in Israel (13% of the Israeli population), The United States, and some countries of Western Europe, including Belgium and the United Kingdom (Staetsky, 2020). Haredi, meaning “one

who trembles at the word of God," dedicate their lives to serving God and their communities, by living humble and pious lives.

The United Kingdom's Haredi population of approximately 60-70.000 is the largest in Europe and is mostly located in suburban areas of North London, and the northern cities of Manchester and Gateshead (Staetsky, 2020). The British Haredi communities are characterized by a large young population as the growth rate is high. The recent statistics suggest that an average Haredi family in the UK has on average 5.3 children per family (Staetsky, 2020).

Haredi communities across the world differ and their traditions and personal values are influenced by the diversity of cultural influences that come from their members' origins (Paul, 2007). However, their strong affinity in approach to their religious beliefs means that all Haredi strive to live by the strict rules directed by religion and their unique communal customs related to where they originally come from (Kalagy,2020). Their insularity is also a common aspect of their existence. The pervasive persecutions, antisemitism and memory of the Holocaust are deeply enrooted in them and, for the purposes of self and community preservation, the Haredi tend to live as diasporas, isolated from the general wider society (Fader,2017).

The main purpose of this study is to get an insight into the Haredi mothers' lives and mothering experiences as well to better understand the challenges they face in regards to the social support they might need from the wider outside agencies, independent from Haredi communities.

Haredi women and mothers in the religious communities

The position of women and motherhood are central to the Haredi way of life and are crucial to their communities. The role of a mother is conceptualized within Jewish religious texts such as the Torah and the Talmud, a record of ancient rabbinic debates on the teaching of the Torah (Lehmann and Siebzehner, 2009). Therefore, it is impossible to comprehend understanding the notion of Haredi motherhood without any understanding of the wider cultural, traditional, and religious Jewish framework (Lehmann and Siebzehner, 2009).

The significance of Jewish motherhood is connected to Jewish religious norms that suggest all Jewish women bear Jewish children, and that religion is always transmitted by the mother (Engelsman, Huss and Cwikel, 2018). The roles of women who are wives, mothers, and carers are intertwined into the key doctrines of Judaism and, as a result, Haredi mothers are the sculptors of Haredi identities and are central to the caring and spiritual upkeep and development of families and religious communities (Blumen, 2007).

Therefore, one could deduct that Haredi women are the face of Jewish life and contribute to it as mothers, homemakers, and in some cases, and increasingly more so, also as professionals (Raucher, 2020). Many scholars, including Engelsman *et al* (2018) suggest it is impossible to reflect on the role of mothers and the authority of Jewish motherhood without consulting the teaching of the Hebrew Bible. In addition, according to Bergmann (2020), such concepts of motherhood and Jewish religious beliefs interlink in the Hebrew Bible, and it is challenging to understand one without the other. Informative depictions of conception, pregnancy and breastfeeding characterize motherhood as indispensable to women's existence and key to the Jewish faith (Lehman, Kanarek and Broner, 2017).

Motherly attributes, emotions and characteristics are used in biblical texts to reveal and communicate the principles of religion. Since mothers embody these religious lessons, they become a critical and powerful asset in cultivating religious, godly lifestyles, in growing communities and, most importantly, in offering spiritual, nurturing, and protective guidance to children (Lehman *et al.*, 2017). Women's distinctive roles complement their husbands' and fathers' much wider spiritual involvement in Torah studies and prayer. Fass and Lazar (2011) confirm that whilst Haredi communities follow the typical seclusion-oriented ideology, there is a constant interaction between the religious and secular world and wider society. As a result, the gender roles of the community members expand and fluctuate with many more women deciding to work and follow a career path, and to expand on their Torah knowledge in conjunction with their primary maternal and homemaking duties (Band-Winterstein and Freund, 2013).

Theoretical perspectives

Group-Grid Cultural theory (Douglas, 1986) and Parsons's views on gender roles (Parsons, 1959) are the dominant theoretical frameworks applied in this study. Mary Douglas, a British anthropologist, depicted four types of social organization. Such organizational types are varied and differ from one another in the degree of dominance of every aspect (*e.g.*, family life, culture) and the strength of the grid, including law (Bunting, 2007). As the Haredi constitute an enclave, they score strong at the group level but are weak on the grid. The community is detached from mainstream society, morally robust, and collectively cautious of any defection which is perceived as a threat to their existence (Witzrum and Goodman, 1999).

In this study, the Douglasian approach is used to understand the dynamics of enclaves by identifying and illustrating the "enclave-focused" examples of collectivistic behaviours and Haredi cultural attributes, unique to this setting, described by the study participants.

Parsons' perspectives on gender roles and division of labour are also considered in this study (Parsons, 1959). Parsons demonstrated in the model of the nuclear family that gender inequalities exist as a tool to create a division of labor, where men and women hold predesignated roles and consequently, work together to protect the stability of the society (Parsons, 1959). Haredi women's positions in their communities are changeable (Frenkel and Wasserman, 2020) and Haredi women's roles have been influenced by external factors, such as economic austerity and increasing antisemitism (Kalekin, Fishman and Schneider, 2007).

Being a Haredi mother in the United Kingdom

The data gathered in the study demonstrate that Haredi mothers see themselves as carrying out their divine duties to be wives and mothers, and that these roles are the most essential for them as individuals yet also for their families and communities. All interviewed mothers agreed that leading a pious and modest life was the goal amongst Haredi mothers. They aspired to bring their children up in the aura of religious duties to oneself and to their communities, with religious education and the understanding of and respect for the Haredi cultural diversity providing context.

For 90% of the interview and questionnaire respondents, motherhood epitomizes empowerment – it offers "special powers" to nurture new generations and to have a positive impact on others. It epitomizes survival and enhances recovery after the tragic loss of lives in the Holocaust (Biale *et al.*, 2018).

It is not only seen as a chance to create and shape new life, but also as an opportunity to bring goodness, leading to closeness with God. The majority of the interviewed mothers saw their motherhood as a synonym of strength and pride that boosts the existence of the Jewish people. One interviewed mother said, “I felt an all-consuming love and purpose for the baby and I felt valued by my family and community. I suddenly was so accomplished as a mother that I became an adult.”

This statement suggests that motherhood can be perceived as a “coming of age” moment in women’s lives. They become more visible in the community as their roles as wives and mothers are cemented by the act of a great responsibility. The women are also honored in a form of giving a new life and nurturing it in the atmosphere of Haredi religiosity, strict religious lifestyle and embedded cultural traditions (Lechman *et al.*, 2019).

However, for some Haredi mothers, motherhood can be particularly challenging as their duties might include much more than caring for children and maintaining a well-ordered household.

Seventy-five percent of the respondents to the study also held full or part-time employment. Traditionally, most Haredi men do not do any conventional work but instead focus on their role of studious religious men, spending their time studying Torah (Gonnen, 2006). Whilst this is a paid profession, it does not offer enough to support a family. As a result, many women work and are the main breadwinners (Karen-Kratz, 2021). Such a lifestyle does not fully match Parsons’ views on the nuclear family and division of labor as Haredi mothers, instead of the men, are the main providers. Nevertheless, they continue fulfilling their motherly duties and home keeping which is their prescribed responsibility. Notwithstanding, through being active on the job market, they step into the traditional role of men and redefine the stereotypical image of a nuclear family.

Considering the business and stress and pressure to provide, Haredi mothers’ lives can be very strenuous, especially for those with a large number of children and little support (Stadler, 2002). In order to sustain and manage the difficulties of daily life, many seek help through either Haredi organizations or outside state resources that offer child care, financial benefits and psychological support when required. However, this also comes with a myriad of additional challenges— a lack of understanding of the Haredi way of life and prejudice from the outside agencies, and pressure and shame from their communities who continue to fear exposing weakness, not accepting or ignoring human challenges, including mental health problems. As a result, the Haredi are at an increased risk of substance misuse and suicide (Kesner, 2017).

Haredi mothers’ understanding of social support and their perceptions on the social work engagement

For the study’s participants, the terms social work and social workers evoked mixed feelings. For some these terms are associated with the challenges motherhood can bring but also with failure in their abilities, stigma of not being good enough mothers to their children as well as of the shame of looking for help or being forced to receive it elsewhere, most commonly outside their close community.

Therefore, there is no surprise that for the majority of respondents (80%) the social work support or engagement is problematic. Whilst nearly 70% understand the broad duties of a social worker in the United Kingdom, this understanding is mostly focused on the role of those working with children and families.

In fact, it seems that when asked about the role of social workers, the participants automatically think of dysfunctional families, safeguarding around children, and neglect. There is a general recognition of the positive impact social workers might have. One questionnaire participant said, "I imagine they help families who require assistance in the running of the home or with emotional help."

Whilst this statement suggests a general understanding of a social worker's duties and the value of their work or helping nature, there are also critical perceptions of the profession. Impressions described by one participant include the following:

"As a former teacher, we had many children under social services. We rarely, if ever, met with the social workers, and when there was a crisis, a new caseworker was suddenly assigned to the family. The whole system seems messy and sloppy and all about damage control."

Such examples indicate that the Haredi's involvement with social workers is generally limited and unfavorable. When asked, most participants, even though they might have not received any input from social work, were able to identify the principal challenges of social work that include large caseloads, frequent staff turnover and the limited time that is available for getting to know service users. The above-mentioned factors have been noted by some respondents; however, what has been emphasized by most is the lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity towards the Haredi. The questionnaire's responses brought to light the social workers' lack of knowledge about the community's traditions and customs.

In the past this has led to wrong assumptions and insensitive comments about mothers by social workers, including quick judgements of their mothering performances, that in their eyes, were often seen as poor.

One interviewed mother, Miri, said:

"When health visitors come to the house or a social worker, sometimes they look shocked about how many children we have.... They don't know us but it seems like they already judge us for having too many kids."

Miri's comment suggests that the lack of cultural literacy, and perhaps limited time offered by social workers, leads to poor communication with and understanding of the Haredi mothers, their views and needs. As a result, opportunities to establish trust and positive working relations with the mothers are sparse and it is not surprising that such poor engagement with social work service creates dependence on one another and community-based organisations. The already established trust amongst Haredi mothers means that the fear of judgement and lack of understanding is minimized when they seek support from their community organisations.

Conclusion

Haredi mothers in the United Kingdom live busy, religious and family- focused lives in an enclave that is organized and controlled by the strict rabbinic law (Bunting, 2007). The main objective of such a way of life is compliance, without which the enclave disintegrates and loses its position, and the rabbis lose their position, power and respect (Hakak, 2011). Conformity, as per Douglas's definition of an enclave, is required and mothers, through their full commitment to the religious nurturing and upbringing of the new generation of ultra-orthodox children, accept and eternalize the enclave's strong rules of belonging and compliance (Taragin-Zeller, 2021).

Mothers who are key to the survival of the Haredi minority form the moral and increasingly financial skeleton upon which the generations rely to survive (Keren-Kratz,2021). Admirably, they are often the main breadwinners with nearly the sole responsibilities of maintaining the household and bringing up the children according to the strict Jewish laws and traditional customs (Greenberg and Witzrum, 2001).

The additional support they may or may not require or are forced to succumb to from outside organizations is frowned upon and problematic as it carries the stigma of not being a good enough mother. This questions their whole purpose and forces them to expose their needs and shortcomings to the outside world, the world that in their experience criticizes, judges and patronize them. That world is the secular world, full of prejudice and anti-Semitic attitudes that are on the rise (Ferber, 2019).

In addition, there is a fear of being double stigmatized: first by social workers for what can be seen as mothers' deficiencies in parenting; and second, by other community members who, as noted by one of the interviewees, "can be very judgemental of others and constantly criticize how other mothers dress, carry themselves, or raise their children."

The study's respondents understood the cloistered nature of the Haredi minority and how challenging it can potentially be to seek and provide help to its members and the mothers in particular as they hold such a strong role in the religious education of their children. However, many indicated an awareness of the increasing mental health problems amongst the mothers and children, and a need to seek help through the means of purposefully trained members of their communities and through outside organizations.

In order to be able to successfully work with the Haredi, social work organizations must address current barriers and shortcomings, including the weak cultural understanding and lack of sensitivity of staff. Overall, the participants agreed that social workers "must come from the community, otherwise there will be no trust."

In women's perceptions of social work involvement with Haredi communities, the awareness and understanding of cultural norms, such as arranged marriages ("shidduch"), dress code, diet, Jewish calendar, and festivals as well as social behaviour, is key to a successful engagement with the community (Whiteley, Coyle and Gleeson, 2017). Only by seeking to understand halachic laws and community norms will social support become more meaningful and suited to the cultural needs of the Haredi mothers, to whom trust is key in building wider relationships out of the community (Chau, 2008).

The initiatives mentioned by some participants suggest cultural competence training and "supervision/consultation from a qualified Haredi social worker" as helpful whilst working with Haredi mothers. Such initiatives could provide a good basis for the effective, non-oppressive and non-discriminatory social work practices that are fundamental to the social work values of equality and social justice (Rogers, 2011). Yet, as highlighted by the participants, such practices seem to be often neglected or overlooked due to the strenuous nature of the social work profession and the lack of knowledge and cultural competence of the worker.

British Haredi mothers who offered their personal input for this study stressed the importance of their motherhood and referred to it as empowerment but they also highlighted the challenges of peer

pressure and the stress of providing for the family. To them, motherhood is a divine duty, a duty to their religion and culture.

For most of the questioned mothers, the memory of the Holocaust deeply engraved in the multiple generations of the Haredi minority contributes to the desire for larger families and living insular modest lives, far from the outside world's influences that can contaminate the purity and simplicity of their existence (Raucher, 2021). Therefore, seeking or succumbing to the social work support is seen as a challenge for the mothers and Haredi communities who aspire to avoid any disturbance and interference from the wider society (Band-Winterstein and Freund, 2015). Such support, mostly due to the increasing pressure on mothers and the economic challenges faced by all communities, becomes more of a regular occurrence. Whilst it is generally not viewed favorably, the respondents suggest that it could be improved with the enhanced understanding of the Haredi culture and religious needs. According to them, trust can be established with mutual understanding, respect, open mind and the cultural competence which, at the moment, continue to be the main obstacle.

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