

Listen to Her Voice: The Ma'yan Report
*Assessing the Experiences of Women in the Jewish Community and
their Relationships to Feminism*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In celebration of its tenth anniversary, Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, a program of the JCC in Manhattan, embarked on a research project to explore Jewish women's identification with feminism, to assess the current experiences of women in the Jewish community, and to uncover future directions for advocacy and change. Using a community-based participatory research model, Ma'yan convened 38 focus groups in eight locations across the United States and spoke with 365 Jewish women who identified as "Jewish women who care about Jewish women" (see Appendix 3 for a chart of focus groups). During focus group sessions lasting approximately an hour and a half, participants completed written surveys (see Appendix 1) and then participated in a facilitated discussion. Ma'yan sampled participants to reflect a broad range of American Jewish experience including diversity with respect to age, geographic location, denomination, Jewish heritage, sexual orientation, marital status, income, and childrearing status (see table 2, p. 138).

Focus group discussion revolved around three basic questions and relevant probes:

1. **Feminism:** Do you call yourself a feminist? Why or why not? What does it mean to be a Jewish feminist? Do you experience conflict and/or integration between your identity as a Jew and as a woman and/or feminist?
2. **Inclusion and Exclusion:** In what ways do you feel (and have you felt) included in or excluded from the Jewish community as a woman?
3. **Future Directions:** What changes must be made to make the Jewish community more inclusive and empowering for women and girls?

These questions stimulated wide-ranging discussions. The following key findings emerged from analysis of the discussions and written surveys:

KEY FINDINGS:

1. **The Jewish community is still not a level playing field for Jewish women.**
 - 70% of focus group participants believe women are underrepresented as community leaders.
 - 82% of focus group participants believe the Jewish media does a poor job of reporting on women's/feminist issues.
 - Focus group participants consistently prioritized the advancement of women's leadership in the Jewish community and many believe more women leaders would make a significant difference in the Jewish community's future direction and priorities.
2. **The Jewish community is not sufficiently inclusive of the diversity of Jewish women and their experiences.**

- The majority of focus group participants, who are active and contributing members in the Jewish community, have experienced Jewish communal institutions as less than hospitable to them at some point in their lives – due not only to their gender but to their class, age, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity, intermarriage and/or ethnicity.
- 76% of focus group participants believe that the Jewish community is not sufficiently inclusive of single parents. Single women who participated in focus groups indicated that they face a lack of acceptance in the Jewish community. They are often made to feel unwelcome, or are treated as problems that the community must “solve” through matchmaking and the exertion of pressure to reproduce.
- 93% of focus group participants believe that the Jewish community needs to be more inclusive of same-sex couples. Openness to lesbians, bisexuals, transgender and queer identified¹ individuals and to non-traditional families is increasing but there are many areas in which it is not secured or institutionalized.
- The majority of focus groups cited class barriers to leadership and participation in Jewish communal life. The fact that financial resources remain a definitive factor in becoming a Jewish communal lay leader prevents a diversity of women from attaining these positions.

3. Most Jewish communal organizations are not sufficiently “women-friendly” environments.

- The majority of focus group participants who work in the Jewish community have experienced: some level of gender discrimination in pay and professional advancement, biased comments or behavior, and/or lack of mentoring.
- Despite the rhetoric of being “family-centered,” Jewish organizations promote a workaholic culture that runs counter to a healthy work/life balance and particularly affects mothers, who continue to be most responsible for childcare and household tasks.
- When flex-time and other alternatives to the traditional working schedule are available in Jewish organizations, they tend to be negotiated on an individual basis. The lack of institutionalization of such policies places unnecessary burdens on employees and supervisors alike.
- Persistent sexism has driven some women to leave Jewish communal work.
- The majority of focus group participants continue to volunteer their time in service of Jewish communal institutions, yet many perceive the boards of these institutions as

¹ For an explanation of these identifications see p. 72.

hierarchical, closed structures that perpetuate a “male culture” and privilege people with wealth. Federations were singled out as particularly egregious in this respect.

4. Most focus group participants highly value the impact of Jewish feminism on their religious, spiritual and cultural lives. Many identify as feminists and/or Jewish feminists and they define these identities in a variety of ways.

- Over two-thirds of focus group participants identified as feminists though their definitions of the word varied widely. 98% of focus group participants believe that Jewish women should monitor and advocate for women’s rights in the larger society.
- Women’s access to sacred texts, rituals and responsibilities of synagogue life, and positions of religious leadership, particularly the rabbinate, has vastly augmented their experience of Judaism. Many focus group participants credited their continued identification with Judaism to feminism.
- Many Jewish women remain conflicted about how much change they want in the religious realm and what the right balance is between adopting traditional language, garb, and rituals and creating new forms of Jewish practice.

5. Many Jewish educational settings are lagging behind in incorporating materials about women.

- The great proliferation of Jewish feminist literature and scholarship generated over the past 30 years has not yet made it into the “canon” of Jewish texts used by most Jewish educators, academics and rabbis. Despite the fact that women constitute the majority of adult learners in many Jewish educational settings, most curricula do not incorporate materials informed by feminism or Jewish women’s history. Though some Jewish educators have developed feminist curricula, there is no effective mechanism to widely share and disseminate these materials.
- Two-thirds of focus group participants are dissatisfied with their own level of knowledge about women in Judaism. Many focus group participants indicated their self-perceived lack of Jewish education prevents them from assuming greater leadership in their communities.
- 99% of focus group participants believe that studying Jewish female role models should be an integral part of Jewish education for children. 74% of mothers surveyed are dissatisfied with their children’s current level of education about women in Judaism and Jewish history.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

2003 was a meaningful if generally overlooked landmark year for Jewish American women. It marked the 30th anniversary of the historic First National Jewish Women's Conference (often referred to as the Network Conference) that put the initial ideas and agenda of Jewish feminism on the national stage. Sparked by the secular women's movement and fueled by the creative renaissance in American Jewish life following the Six-Day War, American Jewish feminism quickly captured the hearts and minds of religious and secular Jewish women. Through the efforts of many grassroots activists, scholars and leaders, feminism made progress in virtually all spheres, particularly in the area of religious change.² Still, by 1993, 20 years after the Network Conference, while Jewish feminism had begun to transform many aspects of American Jewish life for women as well as men, much remained to be achieved.

The history of Jewish feminism in the United States cannot be understood outside the context of American feminism, which, by 1993, had changed significantly. While some feminists continued to focus on issues of equity, enfranchisement and legal rights, others increasingly focused on the development of an alternative culture and/or the transformation of structures of power and meaning. Feminism as a body of knowledge and a lens with which to understand the world was also increasingly grappling with ways to incorporate more complex understandings of the intersections of race, class and gender into its theories and practices.

While the Jewish women's movement continued to focus on parity in communal and religious institutional life and on bringing a feminist lens to Jewish history text and ritual, changes in the larger feminist movement also affected Jewish women. Issues of class, sexuality, ethnic background, education, family status, etc. bubbled to the surface and widened the Jewish feminist agenda to include larger social justice issues.

1.2 About Ma'yan

Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project was founded in 1993 by Barbara Dobkin and Eve Landau as a unique program of the JCC on the Upper West Side (now the JCC in Manhattan). Ma'yan's mission is to serve as a catalyst for change in the Jewish community in order to create an environment more inclusive of and responsive to women, their needs and their experiences. Over the course of its first ten years, Ma'yan pursued this mission by working in the fields of ritual, education, philanthropy, and Jewish communal leadership.

Ma'yan quickly gained a national reputation for feminist spiritual innovation based on the success of its community feminist seders and its feminist haggadah, *The Journey Continues*. Ma'yan enhanced that reputation by publishing *Journey*, a quarterly journal exploring issues central to the

² For a good short summary of Jewish feminism see: Hyman, Paula, "Jewish Feminism," in *Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, Eds. Paula Hyman and Deborah Dash Moore (New York: Routledge, 1997), 694-698.

organization's mission. Locally, Ma'yan offered classes, *Rosh Chodesh* experiences and other ritual celebrations for women. In 1997, Ma'yan sponsored the first of two major national exhibitions of Jewish feminist ritual art which inspired the popularization of Miriam's Cups and later, the creation of Purim flags celebrating the legacies of Esther and Vashti. Ma'yan also produced an *Ushpizot*³ poster for Sukkot highlighting biblical women, a curriculum on women in the Bible and Midrash, and a guide to conducting communal women's seders. In 2001, Ma'yan joined with Kolot: The Center for Women and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College to launch ritualwell.org, a web-based resource of rituals for lifecycle events and holidays. Other significant Ma'yan activities in the realm of education have included organizing and running the Jewish Feminist Research Group (JFRG) for scholars to share unpublished work and works-in-progress and partnering with the Jewish Women's Archive (JWA) to create materials for Women's History Month that helped promote its celebration within the Jewish community.

In the communal sphere, Ma'yan sponsored three conferences on "Women and Money" to encourage Jewish women philanthropists to think of themselves as Jewish feminist donor activists. In 1998 Ma'yan published *Power and Parity*, a groundbreaking and widely cited study of women's lay leadership on national Jewish boards.⁴ After the release of the report, Ma'yan hired the change management consulting firm Bronznick/Jacoby to pioneer two pilot change-making initiatives with major national Jewish organizations interested in changing board culture and addressing gender issues in lay leadership. This work eventually led Ma'yan to sponsor *Impact and Influence*, a summit for women volunteer leaders of national Jewish organizations held in May 2003 under the leadership of Shifra Bronznick and the Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI). During the same period, Ma'yan's work in the volunteer arena helped lay the groundwork for the founding of *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community* (AWP).

1.3 The Ma'yan Study

The year 2003 was also Ma'yan's tenth anniversary. To mark this milestone, Ma'yan undertook its second long-term strategic planning initiative. Ma'yan convened intensive discussions about the direction and scope of the organization. In contemplating the trends within and the larger societal conditions surrounding the Jewish American women's movement, we explored a broad range of issues, activities and possible new directions. We also became aware that our vision was limited by our individual experiences and long-held perceptions.

Ma'yan decided to test our assumptions – in particular the basic assumption that the Jewish community is not fully "responsive to and inclusive of" the "needs and priorities" of Jewish women – by undertaking an in-depth study to gain a current and accurate understanding of American Jewish women. We reviewed existing research and discovered that, with some important exceptions discussed below, there is little up-to-date research into the relationship between Jewish

³ *Ushpizot* is an Aramaic word for female guests, who are symbolically welcomed into the *sukkah* on the holiday of *Sukkot*. Note that all Hebrew words can be found in the glossary on p. 137.

⁴ Horowitz, Bethamie, Beck, Pearl, and Kadushin, Charles (1997). *Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations: A Ma'yan Report*. New York: Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, a Program of the JCC on the Upper West Side; Ma'yan (1998). *Power and Parity: Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations: A Ma'yan Report*. New York: Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project, a Program of the JCC on the Upper West Side.

women and the Jewish community, and even less knowledge about Jewish women's experiences with and feelings about feminism and Jewish feminism.⁵

Given the lack of existing data, the changing landscape of Jewish feminist organizations, and, persistent questions of strategy and priority facing Ma'yan, in the spring of 2003, we launched a national study of Jewish women, their attitudes toward and experiences with feminism and the Jewish community, and their vision for the future.

This study, *Listen to Her Voice: The Ma'yan Report, Assessing the Experiences of Women in the Jewish Community and their Relationships to Feminism*, offers a gauge of the effects, successes, challenges, and unfinished work of American Jewish feminism as it moves into its fourth decade. While the Ma'yan Study has served a significant purpose in informing decisions about the future of the organization, we believe its relevance is much broader. *Listen to Her Voice* contains many perspectives deserving of attention. By bringing these voices together, synthesizing their meaning, and analyzing their similarities and differences, we offer all who are engaged in the feminist transformation of Jewish life and all who care about the future of the Jewish community a useful assessment of where we stand on issues of significance to our collective endeavor. We will continue to use what we learn from this study to set the direction for Ma'yan – its programs, goals and aspirations – for the next decade, and to contribute to a wider conversation among women and men who care about the American Jewish community and women's changing roles within it.

⁵ For an excellent survey of research on Jewish women before 1994, see Sales, Amy (1995). "Surveying the Landscape: Current Research on Jewish Women," in *Voices for Change: Future Directions for American Jewish Women* (Waltham, MA: The National Commission on American Jewish Women, Hadassah and Brandeis University).

2. FEMINISM AND JEWISH FEMINISM

- Over 75% of focus groups participants identified as feminists.
- While women identified strongly with the goals of feminism, many expressed ambivalence about the word.
- Focus group participants seek contexts in which they can integrate Judaism and feminism.

2.1 Introduction

The term feminism has a long and varied history. Since its coinage in France in the 1880's, it has been assigned a variety of meanings and has always had many vocal opponents both within and outside the women's movement. The flexibility of the term and its constant re-definition has often caused confusion but has also allowed it to stand the test of time and remain an important definer for its adherents. By the 1990s—the era sometimes considered the Third Wave of the American women's movement—feminism had evolved significantly from its Second Wave, which had begun among middle and upper-middle class white women. In response to the critiques and contributions of working-class women, lesbians, women of color, religious women, and activists from around the world, the feminist movement has emerged as a diverse and complex movement, interested not only in the difference gender makes, but also in race/ethnicity, class, sexuality and nationality.⁶ In other words, contemporary feminisms are movements recognizing the significance of gender while also attending to the different ways women experience gender given their social privilege or lack thereof.⁷

2.1.1. Findings on Jewish Feminism

Jewish feminism has also developed significantly over the past 30 years. In some ways Jewish feminism parallels the development of general feminism, and in some ways it is particular to the situation of Jews and Jewish women. Jewish feminists are and have always been a diverse group. Many Jewish feminists active in the 70's defined themselves as Jews interested in claiming equal rights within the Jewish religion. They focused primarily on the religious and educational realms of Jewish life. Others who also focused on issues of equality set their sights on achieving parity for women within Jewish communal organizations.

As feminism has matured over the past twenty-five years, Jewish feminism has also grown to reflect more fully a diverse range of individuals, agendas, and politics. With the realization of equal access in some areas of the religious realm, many Jewish feminists shifted their activities and goals from achieving parity with Jewish men to questioning the foundations of Judaism as a patriarchal religion and seeking change.

⁶ Freedman, Estelle B. (2002). *No Turning Back: A History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. New York: Ballantine Books, 3-7.

⁷ Ibid.

2.1.2 *The American Context*

Despite political backlash and media reports claiming otherwise, research indicates that American women and men largely identify with the achievements of the women's movement and with support for women's rights. The most recent study of American women's attitudes towards feminism and the women's movement found that attitudes towards feminism have shifted from 1995 to 2003.⁸ In 2003, according to a Ms. Poll, 83% of American women approved of the movement to strengthen women's rights; that percentage jumped to 92% for the 18-24 year-old age group. When asked if feminists and the women's movement had been helpful to them, 76% of women said yes. A Gallup poll of American women and men taken in 2000 found similar results; 85 percent of Americans believe that women should have equal rights.⁹

Identification with the term feminism is less widespread than support for women's rights. An NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll taken in June 2000 found 29% of all American women and men identified as feminists; the Ms. Poll which surveyed only women found that 56% identified as feminists. The Ms. Poll included a follow-up question which offered respondents a dictionary definition of feminist and asked if they agreed with it. When offered the definition of a feminist as "someone who supports political, economic, and social equality for women," the Ms. Poll found the number of "feminists" shot up to 77%.¹⁰ Other definitions of feminism were not used in the poll.

Jewish women's attitudes towards feminism have not been widely studied, but research points towards a highly positive identification with the general idea of feminism. The only full study on feminism's impact on the American Jewish community found that middle-aged Jewish women experience feminism as having had a profound impact on their lives.¹¹ A study of American Jewish attitudes on social justice issues found that 86% of Jews have a favorable attitude towards the pro-choice movement as do 95% of leaders of Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRC).¹² This suggests a high identification with the women's movement in general.

2.2 *Findings on Feminist Identification*

2.2.1 *Feminists: An Overwhelming Majority*

- Over three-quarters (76%) of focus group participants identified as feminists.

⁸ The Peter Harris Research Group conducted the Ms. Poll between January 18 and February 3, 2003 with 1,007 individuals, who made up a representative sample of American households. The margin of error was three percentage points. See Dusky, Lorraine (2003). "Ms. Poll: Feminist Tide Sweeps in As the 21st Century Begins," *Ms. Magazine*, 8:1, 56-61.

⁹ Freedman (2002), 10.

¹⁰ Dusky (2003).

¹¹ Fishman, Sylvia Barack (1993). *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community*. New York: The Free Press.

¹² Cohen, Steven M. (2000). *Religion and the Public Square: Attitudes of American Jews in Comparative Perspective*. Philadelphia, PA.: Center for Jewish Community Studies.

76% of survey respondents answered the question “Are you a feminist?” in the affirmative. Discussion in the focus groups revealed diversity in the definitions of feminism and significant ambivalence about the term. Nonetheless, it is significant that survey respondents who identified as feminists included women of all ages and denominations, women employed outside the home and women not currently employed, and women from every region in the country. The highest percentage of participants who identified as feminists was between the ages of 40 and 60 – the generation most closely identified with the emergence of feminism and Jewish feminism during the 1970s.

Table 1

Age	% identity selves as feminists
18-30	77%
30-39	79%
40-49	84%
50-59	80%
60-69	58%
70-79	58%
80+	80%

The percentage of young women who identified themselves as feminists on the survey contradicts anecdotal evidence offered by middle age focus group participants who often spoke of their students or daughters not being feminists. This discrepancy suggests the need for more research on the attitudes of young women and more intergenerational dialogue about feminism, as differences in definition and approach may cause some of these contradictory findings.

2.2.2 *Jewish Women Support Women’s Rights in the Larger Society*

Jewish women support women’s rights in the larger society and strongly believe that the Jewish community should do more to support these issues.

- 98% of survey respondents believe that Jewish women should monitor and advocate for women’s rights in the larger society.
- 92 % of survey respondents believe that the Jewish community must be at the forefront of protecting women’s reproductive rights.

While focus group participants expressed a desire for the Jewish community and Jewish women to do more for women’s rights in American society, many focus group participants expressed confidence in the Jewish organizations now working for women’s rights, particularly National Council for Jewish Women (NCJW). Some young women expressed concern about the Jewish community becoming too political about issues that divide Jews, such as reproductive rights. Others

questioned the necessity for a Jewish organization to do this work, and preferred becoming involved as Jewish women in the secular organizations advocating on behalf of progressive issues.

My first thought was, why should we separately, Jewishly, lobby for those things? We should just be out there as women doing those things. But then I was thinking, the truth is, I'm much more likely to actually show up and do something if the people in my community are doing it.

Many women were unhappy that general women's issues were not receiving more attention within the Jewish organizations and synagogues with which they are involved.

Our rabbis don't speak of [women's issues] from the pulpit. Our synagogue is not giving money to them.

Indeed, some said the lack of such vocal support and outwardly focused activism is part of why they are not as active in the Jewish community as they might otherwise be.

Basically, because of Israel issues, the Jewish community gets stuck politically when it comes to a lot of leftist political causes in this country... That frustrates me.

I have a lot of rage about the portion of the organized Jewish community that has come out against affirmative action. To me, that is a women's issue as much as anything....I think it's connected to Jews becoming more affluent.

Others made clear they too have conflicting priorities.

As a Jew, I feel very under siege right now. I feel the worldwide ...rise in anti-Semitic actions and the anti-Israeli sentiment that has polluted anti-Jewish sentiment makes me as fearful as I've ever been about the continuity of Judaism and the safety of Jews. In times of besiegement, I think people turn to what's familiar. Unfortunately, male leadership, even among "enlightened" women or men, still feels familiar in its authoritativeness. So everything that I want to happen Jewishly and organizationally, I don't feel I can ask for it to happen right now.

2.2.3 Multiple Definitions of Feminism

Participants defined feminism in many different ways. While the elasticity of the word seems to open the possibility for many women to identify as feminists, it also leads to some confusion about what feminism actually is, and can lead others to reject the word despite their identification with the goals and achievements of feminism. Building lasting and successful alliances based on a shared identification with Jewish feminism may prove difficult without discussions to clarify what individuals mean when using the word. On the other hand, identification with the word could prove a useful means to bring together women with diverse political approaches to accomplish common goals.

Many focus group participants identified with what has been referred to as “liberal feminism,” a feminism focused on achieving equal rights for women and men and ending discrimination against women. Many also used the language of choice and inclusiveness to describe the goals of feminism. Others, particularly academics and activists involved in progressive movements, defined the goals of feminism more broadly and spoke of achieving justice for women and other historically disadvantaged populations, fundamentally re-visioning structures of power, and considering the multiple systems of oppression at work in society. Some also used the language of “cultural feminism” to speak about their desire to shift societal and organizational cultures to incorporate “women’s values.”

According to focus group participants, feminism means...

Women should not be discriminated against	<i>I think a feminist is someone who believes that women have been discriminated against on the basis of their sex and should not be.</i>
Inclusiveness	<i>The definition of feminism, to me, is about including everyone around the table. That’s the best definition of feminism.</i>
Putting women at the center	<i>I feel I’m also a feminist in the sense...of trying to stress the importance of the woman’s experience in history and a woman’s point of view on things.</i>
Freedom from defined roles	<i>I consider myself a feminist. I always have. My parents brought me up that I can do anything. I’ve always had that confidence. . . . I am a stay-at-home mom. So I have the ability, I think, to do it all.</i>
Changing power structures in society	<i>What feminism is about is politics, understanding the nature of power in society. Therefore wanting to empower those who had not had power and to change the distribution and the uses, etc. of what power is for.</i>

2.2.4 Importance of Role Models in Feminist Identification

According to focus group participants, personal interactions with self-identified feminists play a significant role in forming identifications with feminism. Many women reported either embracing or rejecting identification as a feminist based on interaction with a known feminist. College remains a crucial time in which women encounter feminists. Some women who had negative experiences with ardent feminists in the ’70s continue to harbor discomfort with the word. On the other hand, many focus group participants explained they had come to identify as feminists because of feminists they had encountered. This process even manifested itself during focus group discussions, when in the course of a focus group, a woman, having listened to the definitions and

stories of other focus group participants, would find herself identifying as a feminist for the first time.¹³

In decades before, I always associated, like so many of you, the bra-burning, very radical type of personality. I'm sitting here realizing that I've been a feminist for about fifteen-twenty years and just never put the label on it. So this is a light-bulb moment for me, because for me it's changed a lot, because I'm now one of them. Not having been a feminist for most of my life, it's much more recent for me.... It took a female role model who was very vociferous about a female's role and took an active role in the synagogue to turn my whole thinking around about accepting everything that the chauvinists put out there.

2.3 Findings on Jewish Feminist Identification

2.3.1 Jewish Feminism Still Largely Understood to Refer to Religious Realm

Jewish feminism is largely but not exclusively understood to mean feminism within the religious sphere of Jewish life. The changes in the status of women within Jewish religious settings over the past 30 years are usually equated with Jewish feminism. Orthodox feminists are among those who most strongly identify as Jewish feminists, and they continue to have a clear agenda for religious and educational change. Some women who are not comfortable identifying as feminists in the secular realm identify as *Jewish* feminists precisely because they appreciate what they believe to be the limits of the definition.

The first thing that comes to my mind is ritual and a series of traditions that I think have a lot of spiritual potential and a lot of spiritual value. So I actually feel more comfortable with the term "feminism" in the context of the Jewish community, because I feel I know concretely what it means in the religious context, and I believe in all that stuff.

I'm a Jewish feminist and I would say a lot of it is reinterpreting Jewish tradition through the lens of women, and changing Judaism so that it more reflects women's interests and women's concerns and egalitarianism.

Coming from a religious background, I see myself as a feminist because of certain things I do that some people would consider wrong for women to do – whether that's advancing my learning, learning Gemara, being part of an all-women's yeshiva. . . . That's the kind of feminism that I come from.

Not all women exclusively identified Jewish feminism with religious change. Some explained that for them Jewish feminism encompasses the religious realm but also includes bringing a “more inclusive eye” to many issues in the Jewish community.

¹³ Note that surveys were filled out at the beginning of every session. Even if a woman changed her mind during a focus group, she was counted in the quantitative data according to how she identified before any discussion began.

For me it means caring about women and ritual and representation, but also being outspoken, not just in synagogue but looking at bringing different political voices to the Jewish community, bringing a more inclusive eye, talking about issues of class and race and gender and sexuality.

Some focus group participants indicated that it was precisely the over-identification of Jewish feminism with the religious realm which prevented them from identifying as Jewish feminists.

I identify as a Jew and I certainly identify as a feminist, but I don't identify as a Jewish feminist. I identify as a Jew much more in a cultural [way] ... To me, saying "Jewish feminist" means you're interested in the liturgical aspects and the spiritual aspects.

I sometimes see all this focus on finding a matriarch annoying. It's not, for me, the justice that I'm looking for. That's not where my tikkun olam is going to take me. That's the route that I do everything [through] and gender is part of that and my feminism is part of that.

The identification of Jewish feminism with the movement for religious change for women has been previously noted and analyzed. According to Sylvia Barack Fishman, Jewish feminists see Jewish feminism as primarily a movement for religious change because of the dual contexts of the religious bias of American society and the westernized nature of much of American Judaism.¹⁴ Many focus group participants fit this pattern. They immediately began to speak about the religious realm when they were asked to reflect on the meaning of Jewish feminism. Yet Jewish women highly involved in the secular institutions of Jewish communal life spoke about Jewish feminism in terms of inequalities in that realm. Participants active in progressive circles within and outside the Jewish community often spoke of Jewish feminism as a commitment to social justice or *tikkun olam*. Some of this last group also discussed Jewish feminism in the context of anti-Semitism in the women's movement.

2.3.2 Jewish Feminism as a Commitment to Social Justice

A significant segment of focus group participants equated Jewish feminism with *tikkun olam*, the Jewish commitment to repairing the world. For them, Jewish feminism is part of a larger movement for social justice. Many also believe Jewish feminism does not have to be pursued in the Jewish community; it can mean feminism informed by Judaism but applied in non-Jewish contexts.

For me, being a Jewish feminist is about tikkun olam, which just means I'm going wherever it takes me. Wherever I see injustice, I'm going there, whether it's gender, or poverty, or transgender... So it's not necessarily just focused on gender issues for me. There seem to be very similar values for me as a feminist and as a Jew.

¹⁴ Fishman, Sylvia Barack (2001). "Women's Transformations of Public Judaism: Religiosity, Egalitarianism, and the Symbolic Power of Changing Gender Roles," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 17, 132.

Jewish feminism is a way of addressing and healing and opening the world to new kinds of justice and a more whole way of being human and being whatever the feminist word for menschlich is.

That's what I think of when I think of a Jewish feminist—somebody who brings that uniquely Jewish perspective to the issues of women and the world.

These definitions of Jewish feminism open many possibilities, yet they also present challenges for those organizing under the rubric of Jewish feminism.

2.3.3.1 Jewish Feminism as a Response to Jewish Invisibility and Anti-Semitism in the Women's Movement

Some focus group participants active in secular and multi-ethnic feminist contexts see identification with Jewish feminism as a way of claiming a cultural/ethnic/religious identification sometimes erased or made invisible. Through the publication of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* which highlighted experiences of anti-Semitism in the lesbian feminist movement and the well-publicized responses of women including Letty Cottin Pogrebin and Phyllis Chesler to anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism at the UN Conferences on Women,¹⁵ this issue has received more attention.

Within the last couple of years, I feel I need to identify myself as a Jewish feminist because of my experiences within the feminist community -- both insensitivity to religious and cultural difference and sometimes overt or implicit anti-Semitism. I didn't use to have any hesitation about using "feminist" and now I feel I need more often to identify myself as a Jewish feminist.

I think a lot of ...[feminist and] leftist groups have a real problem with Jews and with Israel in particular. They'll stomp all over you if you don't stand up for Judaism and being a Jew and what that really means... If you are Jewish and you are a feminist, you can't be a feminist without being a Jewish feminist, because your Judaism will get totally pushed aside and denigrated and you'll be forced to condemn your Judaism.

The experiences of these participants pointed to identification with Jewish feminism as an assertion of a proud Jewish identity within feminist contexts that have proved hostile to such assertions. Some focus group participants suggested Jewish feminist organizations should take more of a role supporting activists in secular feminist realms.

2.3.4 Jewish Feminism as Claiming a Legacy of Strong Jewish Women

Some focus group participants who identified as Jewish feminists used the term as a way to claim a heritage of strong Jewish women. They spoke of their mothers, grandmothers, and great

¹⁵ For later accounts of these events see: Pogrebin, Letty Cottin (1991). *Deborah, Golda and Me*. New York: Crown Publishers; and Chesler, Phyllis (2003). *The New Anti-Semitism*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

grandmothers as Jewish feminist role models. Their Jewish feminism indicates pride in Jewish women's activity, achievement and tenacity over many generations.

Some women got together to take a look at our own history. We read together a book that was brand-new at the time, which was the Paula Hyman's Jewish Women in America. There was a chapter on Jewish women in the labor movement. I discovered that my grandmother was just such a leader.... For me, it was recovering those roots and realizing that the image of the strong Jewish, yes, feminist, woman was one that had really been celebrated by Jewish history. So it wasn't such a big leap for me to own that feminism.

This identification of feminism is reflected in the movement's continued focus on recovering Jewish women's history and on telling the stories of one's own female ancestors.

2.3.5 Jewish Feminism as an Alternative to "White" Feminism

One of the critiques of mainstream Second Wave feminism, as discussed above, was that it represented the experiences of middle and upper middle class white women as the universal experience of all women. This critique of mainstream feminism has had an impact on Jewish feminism. For some younger focus group participants, Jewish feminism is a chosen identification precisely because identifying with Jewish feminism offers an alternative to identifying with "white" feminism.

I see a big difference between feminist and Jewish feminist, just like the reaction I have when I hear those words. I identify more strongly with Jewish feminist. When I hear the word "feminist," I often think of "white" and I think of the exclusiveness that happened in the feminist movement towards issues with people of color.

These women identify Jewish feminism as a movement that stands in alliance with feminist movements of women of color. One woman spoke about being active as a Jewish feminist in college in the following way:

...Coming from a Jewish grounding and working with women of color from different cultures to do work that reflected our culture as women. I find that much more interesting--the intersection of where history and culture and spirituality come together in queer and women's issues than just a generic, white, feminism that never really had a lot of texture or interest for me.

While these women emphasized Jewish feminism as different than "white feminism," others expressed concern that Jewish feminism is too often presented and experienced as "white."

When you ask, "What does Jewish feminism mean to you?" the first thing that comes into my head is "very white and very middle-class and not concerned about broader social justice issues."

I do consider myself to be a Jewish feminist. What bothers me about that label is that people normally assume that means white, and that's not what I am.

The assumption that Jewish feminists are white feminists erases the experiences of Jews of color. It also accepts the categorization of Jews as white, a classification that is challenged not just by Jews of color and Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews but also by the experiences of Ashkenazi Jews who do not fully identify with mainstream American “white culture.” As the above quotations reveal, the identification of Jewish feminism as “very white” carries with it a critique of the class assumptions and agenda of Jewish feminism.

These multiple definitions of Jewish feminism indicate that a range of Jewish feminisms exist. This presents challenges and opportunities to any organization that defines itself, implicitly or explicitly, as Jewish and feminist. It further suggests the importance of creating opportunities for different kinds of Jewish feminists to interact with one another and learn from each other’s experiences and viewpoints.

2.4 Importance of Jewish Feminism in Women’s Jewish Identity

2.4.1 Jewish Identification Dependent on Feminist Possibilities

Despite the significant differences in their definitions of Jewish feminism, most focus group participants indicated that it has played a central role in their lives. Participants often explained that without feminism, they would not have maintained a connection with the Jewish community or at least as strong an identification with Judaism and/or Jewishness. Some credited specific Jewish feminist books or writers for reviving their Jewish identity.

I couldn't be a Jew without being a Jewish feminist. I definitely had to rediscover Judaism as a feminist to be Jewish again.

As difficult as it is for me even now to find a place that feels comfortable to be a Jew, if it were not for the feminist progress that has been made, there would be no place at all.

I feel that I came emotionally to my Jewishness through my lesbian feminism... I read Nice Jewish Girls and I connected emotionally for the first time to my Jewishness in my early thirties. I always felt pretty alienated from it. So that was fabulous! Changed my life.

2.4.2 Integrating Judaism and Feminism

As the quotes above suggest, many women experience remarkable congruence between their Jewish and feminist identities. They have achieved this integration of feminism and Judaism by seeking out environments in which it is possible to build bridges between the two systems of meaning.¹⁶ This often requires somewhat flexible definitions of both Judaism and feminism. In the words of one rabbi, “Judaism is revolutionary. Feminism is part of the revolution.” Not only did some participants experience feminism as central to their Jewish identification, many also explained that Judaism has taught them how to be better feminists.

¹⁶ The importance to many participants of finding synagogues that are welcoming and inclusive of women is further discussed in the Religious Life section.

As a Jew, learning about tikkun olam and learning about the spiritual side of it helped me bring spirituality to my feminism and realize that marching in a protest rally, or attending a conference, is . . . a spiritual act, if I bring that to it, so it informed my Judaism and was informed by my Judaism.

For me, the two identities are so intertwined, I don't think I'd be an active, involved Jew if I wasn't a feminist, and I don't think I could be as powerful a feminist if I wasn't an active, involved Jew.

Some described the integration of their Jewishness and feminism as an ongoing process central to their lives.

I was born in Havana and I come from a Cuban Jewish background. I'm not sure which is the Jewish and which is the Latin, patriarchal, oppressive... I think both. And I think they synergistically make it really oppressive. ... So I struggle. It's the core of my life that struggle to assert my being within this community that basically wanted to suppress me totally... It's a real core in my life to make feminism—or what I wish now to call “humanism”—and Judaism be one.

I was Jewish first, but once I became a feminist, it was very hard to hold onto that Judaism. But I think that attending a [Jewish feminist] conference, and having a child, and being in a community like this, has allowed for those two to come together. Also, becoming stronger in the identity of feminism. . . I think now it's easier to incorporate different parts of our lives. Being Jewish informs everything we do. So does being a feminist. So it's really hard to separate them. They're both really important in how we look at the world, how we see the world, how we act in the world.

These findings contrast with the work of those who described Jewish feminists, borrowing Adrienne Rich's term, as “split at the root.”¹⁷ While the feeling of being internally conflicted persists, it is counterbalanced by the experience of congruence between Judaism and feminism expressed by many focus group participants. One of the key factors in making Jewish feminist identification easier is the presence of a supportive community of Jewish feminists:

It's come together in the past year maybe. It was finding a synagogue that I felt comfortable with and finding a community of Jewish women that identified as feminist. I was feminist for a long time...but it was not until the past year that I stand in front of my... students and that's who I am...a Jewish feminist... It's a package deal.

2.5 Lack of Identification with Feminism and Jewish Feminism

Focus group discussions also uncovered significant ambivalence, distaste for, and disagreement with the terms “feminism” and “Jewish feminism” and some of the meanings attributed to them.

¹⁷ Fishman (1993), 1.

2.5.1 Negative Connotations of Feminism Persist

Some women who have benefited directly from feminism continue to eschew that identification because of the meanings it has for them. Focus group participants who did not identify as feminists almost exclusively took issue with the word feminism, the tactics and rhetoric of feminists or what they considered radical feminist ideas, rather than with the principle of women's equality. Many also expressed confusion about the exact meaning of feminism.

I wouldn't necessarily label myself as a feminist, but, at the same time, I believe in all of the things that we've talked about. When I think of feminism, sometimes I think of angry, man-hating. . . . I don't feel that way at all, but at the same time I believe in all of the things that support feminist views.

Some participants rejected identification with feminism or placed feminism at a very low priority because they believe there is no longer a need for it, as they have never faced significant barriers as women.

When I was in college and I came out, it was the early 90s. My partner and I . . . both have this sense that we owe this tremendous historical debt to feminists, but at the same time, that doesn't have to be who we are. Maybe that's why, if I had to make a list, being a feminist would be thirtieth or fortieth.

A substantial subgroup of focus group participants chose to identify in focus groups discussions not as feminists or Jewish feminists but as humanists or believers in egalitarianism. They explained they are committed to fairness, but not in a way that privileges women's issues.

I think a lot of people would draw the conclusion that I'm a feminist, but I always have trouble with that word, because I think of myself as a humanist... It's a too-political term and I find it narrow.

Some expressed the desire for a new word that would not carry the baggage of the last 30 years of feminism. Others rejected the whole idea of labeling themselves. For other focus group participants, the word "feminist" implies activism; thus some who were not activists for feminist issues spoke of admiring feminists but felt that they themselves were not feminists.

I think of a feminist as a leader, as someone who's pushing the way forward in an active way... That's not me.

I don't think I would do the word feminist justice in the sense that I'm so into so many other things. In my opinion, when you're a feminist, you're active at seeking equality for women in a political type advocacy situation. That's not something that I tend to do.

Many participants also said feminism continued to carry associations with bra-burning, man-hating, militancy, anger, divisiveness, separatism, a belief in women's superiority and/or a desire to be just like men. Some heterosexual women explained that they or others they know associate feminism

with lesbianism and therefore they do not use the term to describe themselves. Some women who shared these associations indicated they knew these were simplifications of feminism, yet they felt that, unfortunately, these stereotypes still persisted.

People say, "You're a feminist. You read Torah. You've been sole support for your family for twenty years." But I just think of feminists as "down with men." To me, it's negative, problematic. That word just brings up a wrong thing. I believe that, regardless of sex, regardless of sexual preference, people are people. There are things we advocate and we should do. It doesn't matter, male and female; the right things are the right things. So if that makes me a feminist, you all can think that in the back of your heads, but I am not a feminist.

Significant confusion about the difference between equality and sameness also emerged in some focus groups. Some participants explained they were not feminists because they did not want men and women to be the same. They seemed to carry the belief that the feminist ideal is erasing all difference between genders.

Many women who lived through the early years of the feminist movement feel that the meaning of feminism has changed and become more inclusive.

We used to think of feminists as militant, aggressive, even disliking men. But now, to be a woman really is to be a feminist, as far as I'm concerned. It has more to do with equality and [the] right to do what you want to do.

2.5.2 Lack of Identification with Jewish Feminism

While for some participants, responses to Jewish feminism were similar to responses to feminism in general, others had very different feelings – positive and negative – about Jewish feminism. Many were familiar with the idea of Jewish feminism as a concept separate from Jews who are feminists, yet for some participants thinking about “Jewish feminism” was an entirely new experience.

2.5.2.1 Secular Feminists But Not Jewish Feminists

Before participating in the focus groups, many women had never considered the relationship between their identities as Jews and as feminists. These participants maintained their commitment to Judaism and feminism as two disconnected yet significant aspects of their lives.

I am Jewish and I am a feminist, but I don't usually put them together in the same phrase.

Some people talk about how their Judaism and their feminism is really entwined for them, or being gay and being feminist is really entwined for them. All of those things are very separate for me. I think it's because I'm a little bit younger than everyone else.

I don't necessarily associate my feminist role and my Jewish world... I associate Judaism with the synagogue, where they don't have specifically Jewish feminist programs I would get

involved with. I've never been intrigued by the ones they've offered. I just don't know about any other areas where the two would overlap.

The number of women and particularly young women who reported never having thought about the relationship between their feminism and their Judaism suggests a need for outreach about Jewish feminism to the younger generation. Such outreach would be most successful if it presented Jewish feminism in all its diversity.

2.5.2.2 *No Longer a Need for Feminism? Taking Egalitarian Judaism For Granted*

Some women, especially younger women who have grown up in egalitarian synagogues and the Reform movement, see feminism as less relevant to them.

I really feel we've come so far that it's an almost irrelevant word. I think that we don't need the word [feminism] because we can do it. Fifty percent of the students in HUC are now women. I think it's a fact and it's around us and it's a matter of just rising to the occasion and doing what you want to do.

Maybe the reason I don't identify as a feminist and that I don't feel the need to create lots of changes is because I've grown up feeling perfectly included. Women read from the Torah and have aliyot and do all the same things that men do in my synagogue.

Some Jews by choice, and Jews who came back to Judaism after years of not identifying at all religiously, also said they had never needed to identify as Jewish feminists because they had never experienced the exclusionary aspects of traditional Judaism.

As a Jew by choice, I've been able to be the architect of my own Judaism. I came into the tradition with my eyes wide open about Judaism's relationship to women and with a clear sense of what kind of Judaism I could construct for myself that spoke to me. So I have felt challenged by the tradition, but I've never felt oppressed by Jewish patriarchy.

Some younger women described participating in feminist ritual, or taking advantage of opportunities that would have been denied to women a generation before them, yet they did not want to identify their actions as feminist.

I had a seder last year here at school for fifteen of my friends. I had an orange on the seder plate. Does that make me a feminist? No, I just thought that was a good story.

There are people who will ask me, "Oh, you wear a kippah! Are you a feminist?" I just think that's my right as a Jew and I choose that for myself. I wouldn't define that as feminist.

Lack of identification with Jewish feminism among young women is a source of deep concern to some middle-aged feminists and teachers of Jewish feminism. While some celebrate the fact that many girls can take for granted equality of opportunity in ritual life, others worry about the implications of ignorance.

My experience in the classroom is that my students do not want to hear about inequality in the Jewish community. . . that they don't want to accept that there's something that needs to be fixed. . . . It's very hard for them to admit that there's something wrong.¹⁸

The Jewish students, male or female, are not feminists, if they're even very Jewish-identified. So I think there is a lot of work to be done precisely with that age group.

One college student who only recently began to identify herself as a feminist shared a story of the kind of experience that she felt was necessary to jolt women her age into identifying with feminism.

I had a friend who very much saw herself as "I don't need to be a feminist..." Only when she actually heard that right-wing voice that our parents sometimes can shield us from, she was like, "Oh, I guess I have to be a feminist, because I didn't realize that there are people out there who are still saying women shouldn't be learning Talmud and things like that."

Another young woman who had not previously identified as a feminist began to do so out of her increasing interest in women's spirituality.

I never really associated the term "feminism" with myself, but over the years women's spirituality has made me look more into feminism. Just moving here, being in other cities, also seeing women's minyanim, Rosh Hodesh groups, women's seders—those type of things—has a whole new impact on what feminism means to me.

2.5.2.3 Jewish Feminism Seen as Too Limiting to Some Activists

Social justice activists do not always fully identify with Jewish feminism, particularly young women. While for many activist participants Jewish feminism was synonymous with social justice, for others, it was too limited and internally focused in its scope. These latter voices represent a cohort of young women who feel more comfortable among social activists (Jewish and non-Jewish) than among other Jewish feminists. A few young activists specifically explained their anti-establishment views on Israel and Zionism had so alienated them from the Jewish community that they could not imagine identifying with any organized Jewish group that didn't explicitly address their concerns.

I would maybe not identify as a Jewish feminist, because I would think that it's all inner-focused. But I would definitely think of myself as a Jewish activist.

2.5.2.4 Antipathy to Jewish Feminism: Young Women Returning to "Tradition"

Some young women did not identify with feminism because they believed that it conflicted with "traditional" Judaism. Several of these women had adopted an increasingly traditional lifestyle as high school or college students. As they became more religious they grew less comfortable with their previous egalitarian experiences. Previous research into the choices of *ba'a lot teshuva* has

¹⁸ Estelle Freedman suggests that for some American women admitting "any kind of structural inequality challenges the deeply held myth of equal opportunity." This seems to be at play among the students this professor is discussing.

revealed similar patterns but these data further emphasize the importance of teachers and role models during the college years.¹⁹

When I went away to Jerusalem in college, I became very religious... I didn't want to go any more to the Torah, because all of a sudden I found my voice sitting there on my side of the mechitza. .. I don't think I'd ever go back to that same girl who wanted to read from the Torah.. Not that I regret that I did that, because I'm glad that I had that experience and that my family was open-minded enough to do that. But as my own personal choice... I'm much more traditional... My role is more to cultivate Jewish life, to be an educator... to be the mother and the one that brings people together..."

In describing their attraction to tradition, these young women indicated they found something spiritual among traditional women that they had not found growing up in egalitarian settings.

When I first came into contact with my first taste of what Orthodox Judaism was, it was through women and their roles in the family... A lot of the women I saw were really... such huge role models for me...seeing and learning from them the kinds of things that you do when you're married and the kind of things that are going to be expected of you as a woman in society... It's really helped me throughout the years... I learned a lot and I have a lot of respect for these issues because of the way that they were explained to me from Orthodox women who do it themselves. Before that, when I was coming from a Conservative or Reform background, these things were never touched upon, because nobody did them and they thought that they were very archaic and very backward and there was no real spiritual connection to dipping yourself in rainwater..."

One young woman indicated that while she still felt caught between various models of Jewish womanhood, she was choosing a more traditional model. The negative way others had responded to her feminism had clearly had an impact on her.

"...[In high school] everyone was always calling me 'The Rabbi' because I was so take-charge in my Judaism and I wanted all of my friends to be as in love with Judaism as I was ... But then there was this turning point in my life where it was like from "Rabbi" to "Bubbe." I'm twenty-four years old and I don't want to be a Bubbe, but at the same time I don't want to have that negative connotation of being the Rabbi. Now I'm moving into this part of my life where I'm going to make a home with this other person. I'm more religious than he is. I know more than he does. But I want him to bless the children and I want him to lead the seder and I want him to sing eshet hayil..."

These young women who grew up with egalitarian practices, in the course of becoming more religious, have questioned or rejected their prior practices. They are an important group for feminists to consider. One college student described herself as still in the process of integrating

¹⁹ Davidman, Lynn (1991). *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Kaufman, Renee Debra (1991). *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

what she was learning from her campus Chabad²⁰ rabbi with what she had learned in more egalitarian settings. She was clearly unsure about the relationship between egalitarian practices and what she was learning at Chabad.

So I struggle to figure out who is making the most sense, which way I'm going to go with that, before I can figure out what it is that I'm going to stop doing or start doing more. I don't feel comfortable reading Torah, but I don't really know why I don't feel comfortable reading Torah, because [I'm the one] who leads Friday night services and I'm perfectly capable of reading from the Torah.

2.6 Need For More Dialogue

Focus group participants enjoyed talking about feminism and about the intersections of Judaism and feminism in their lives. Many said they do not have enough contexts for doing so. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity afforded by the focus groups to talk about Jewish feminism and the impact of feminism on their lives as Jewish women. Some expressed a desire to meet again in similar groups and a few have actually done so. Others specifically said they would want to widen the circle of women with whom they were talking to make it more diverse. Many reported they have very limited opportunity to meet with women from other denominations of Judaism. They expressed interest in gathering in groups spanning differences of denomination, age and sexual orientation.

The interest in these groups transcended socializing. It seemed much closer to a desire to return to one of the most effective change agents of early feminism: the consciousness-raising group. As one woman said,

I feel like doing that, maybe once a month, talking about issues of discrimination against women, what it means to be a feminist, what it means to be a female Jew, money and power. . . and choosing what issues we might want to deal with as a group. That in itself would be revolutionary.

2.7 Conclusion

While the written surveys revealed a large majority of participants identified as feminists, the focus groups provided extensive qualitative data on the different understandings Jewish women have of feminism and Jewish feminism. Focus groups also revealed that considerable confusion and stereotypes about feminism persist.

Data collected from the focus groups present feminist activists with a wide range of possibilities and challenges. One question is whether use of the word “feminism” is important in and of itself, or whether achieving feminist goals, regardless of language, is more important. Another challenge is how to create more dialogue among those with very different understandings of Jewish feminism.

²⁰ A sect of hasidic Jews invested in outreach to the larger Jewish community

Finally, it is worth exploring the possibility of collaboration between Jewish feminists and other social change activists.

People have such different definitions of feminism. When you say there's a "Jewish feminist agenda," I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't even know what that is. I don't know what the Jewish feminist agenda is. I'm sure if we asked everybody here, everyone would have different items on that agenda.

Given that there is no agreed upon definition of feminism or Jewish feminism, one important project might be developing a deeper shared vision of Jewish feminism. Such a project would have to proceed with extreme caution, given that the search for unified definition could erase diversity and oversimplify significant conflicts. Nonetheless, such a project could have the effect of strengthening and re-energizing the Jewish feminism movement.

3. JEWISH COMMUNAL LEADERSHIP

- Jewish organizations continue to limit women’s access to power in all areas of Jewish communal life.
- Women continue to face inequities in compensation and opportunities for leadership in a culture which remains inhospitable to them.
- Despite “family centered” rhetoric, Jewish organizations promote a workaholic culture that makes healthy work/life balance impossible.
- Focus group participants believe that more women leaders would positively affect the agenda of the Jewish community.

3.1. Introduction

Jewish women are highly qualified to assume leadership of the Jewish community. Half of all Jewish women have graduated from college and 21% hold graduate degrees.²¹ The large majority of Jewish women are employed outside the home²² and most Jewish women continue to work outside the home while they are raising children.²³ Given these statistics and many Jewish women’s deep commitment to the community, one would expect to find Jewish women at all levels of professional and lay leadership in the Jewish organizational world and in visible positions of authority throughout Jewish life. Yet studies of gender balance on the boards and in the top professional positions of the Jewish organizational world tell a different story.

Ma’yan focus group participants, 48% of whom were volunteers in the Jewish community and 37% of whom were employed in Jewish communal organizations, corroborated and deepened earlier findings on these issues with vivid tales and insights from their own lives. Our focus groups with women rabbis and with Jewish women academics further contributed to a composite picture of the issues facing Jewish women communal leaders. Their experiences suggest that work is still needed to make the Jewish community a place where Jewish women can and do lead at every level.

Today, women continue to make up large numbers of Jewish communal workers in lower and middle tiers, while they remain virtually absent from top leadership positions in most areas of professional Jewish life and from many top positions of lay leadership. Further, there are still too few women seated at dais tables of major Jewish communal conferences, and too few women scholars promoted as the Jewish community’s pre-eminent speakers and teachers.

²¹ These percentages indicate that women are still slightly behind men, 61% of whom are college graduates (NJPS 2000-2001).

²² 75% of Jewish women aged 25-44 are employed; Cited in Hyman, Paula E. (1999). “Where Do We Go From Here? Feminism and Changing Gender Expectations and Roles in Jewish Communal Life” in *Creating the Jewish Future*, Michael Brown and Bernard Lightman, eds. (Walnut Creek, California: AltaMira Press), 190.

²³ Hartman, Moshe and Hartman, Harriet (1996). *Gender Equality and American Jews*. Albany: State University of New York Press. The Hartmans report that according to the NJPS 1990: 78.1% of Jewish women with one child work outside the home; 67.6% of mothers with two children work outside the home; and 66.5% of mothers with three children work outside the home.

The issue of numerical representation is, of course, only one measure of feminist progress in the Jewish community. Questions about the management of Jewish organizations, how organizations compensate and treat their employees, what systems are or are not in place to promote life/work balance, what the role of money is in selecting lay leadership – these questions and the answers provided to them by focus group participants are also relevant to a feminist assessment of Jewish organizations.

3.1.1 Ma'yan and Creating Change in Jewish Organizations

Ma'yan began its involvement in the area of women's advancement in Jewish organizations in 1994 when it sponsored research into the roles and position of women volunteers in Jewish communal life. That research, conducted by Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, Dr. Charles Kadushin, and Dr. Pearl Beck was synthesized and presented in Ma'yan's *Power and Parity: Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations* (1998). Ma'yan widely circulated this report and has used it for advocacy and education in a variety of settings. Also in 1994, Ma'yan held the first of three conferences on women and philanthropy. These conferences brought together Jewish women philanthropists and donor activists to educate and inspire them to think strategically about using their resources to create feminist change in the Jewish community.

After the publication of *Power and Parity*, Ma'yan began to work with the change management team Bronznick/Jacoby on translating its research into action. Bronznick/Jacoby identified two national organizations with which to pilot projects for increasing women's leadership in top areas of lay life. While focusing on these two organizations with a strategy that involved both male and female lay leaders, Shifra Bronznick also developed a national cadre of Jewish women lay leaders under the name Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI). WLI offered support to women lay leaders and, with Ma'yan, hosted *Impact and Influence: The Women's Leadership Summit*. The summit, held in May 2003, brought together over 80 women national lay leaders from different organizations to network with one another and strategize regarding issues of gender and lay leadership in the Jewish community.

While Ma'yan began with a focus on women's volunteer leadership, by January 2000 it was becoming clear that initiatives with volunteer leaders needed to be replicated and adapted for the professional realm. By then, the work of Ma'yan and Bronznick/Jacoby had helped create a climate of receptivity within the Jewish organizational world to tackling gender inequities in the professional realm. Strategies had been developed which could now be applied and adapted in the professional arena. Finally, the successes Ma'yan had achieved in raising awareness in the lay realm, while far from complete, served to highlight the gap between the progress there and the lack of progress for Jewish women communal professionals.

Thus, when the Trust for Jewish Philanthropy at United Jewish Communities was soliciting projects for funding in January 2000, Shifra Bronznick developed a proposal for the creation of *Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community* (AWP). The Dobkin Family Foundation agreed to seed the project with a million dollar gift, and the new organization was launched. Since its inception, Ma'yan has remained a close ally of AWP, which has pioneered

important initiatives including a flexibility initiative with Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS), a work/life task force with Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, and a highly acclaimed research and action project on gender equity and organizational effectiveness within the Federation system.

In its first ten years, Ma'yan had a significant impact on the Jewish communal realm through its successful collaborations. Now that AWP is a secure and independent organization and the pilot projects with lay boards have come to a conclusion, Ma'yan has the opportunity to take a new direction in its commitment to Jewish communal change. Jewish organizations must be held accountable to a vision of a Jewish community that lives up to its values and ideals, supports women's leadership, makes possible work/life balance and operates by just and equitable principles.

3.1.2 Prior Research on Jewish Women Professionals

Jacqueline Levine raised the issue of women's role in Jewish communal life at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds in 1972.²⁴ Seven years later, in *Lilith Magazine*, Aviva Cantor observed that women volunteers had little influence and were being used as "free labor" by the Jewish community.²⁵ In 1992, Rela Mintz Geffen, a sociologist who has studied Jewish women volunteers and professionals, wrote: "the greatest scarcity of women in leadership roles is found in... the secular professional role."²⁶ Multiple studies have come to similar conclusions, finding a dearth of women in top positions.²⁷ According to The Council of Jewish Federation's *Survey on the Status of Women in the Leadership and Professional Positions of Federation* (1993), 36% of the Federation executive directors in small cities were women in 1993, compared to no female CEOs in large cities.²⁸ Since then, women have made some advances in Jewish communal life as volunteers and professionals, but progress has often been slow and much is yet to be accomplished.

The top executives of Jewish federations are all men in the largest 20 Jewish communities in the United States today.²⁹ While the situation is improving, particularly on the local level, men lead all major national Jewish organizations responsible for public policy, advocacy, education or communal relations, except one. All the denominational unions, seminaries and rabbinical associations are run by men (with one exception), and many national organizations with educational and renewal agendas including the JCCA, JESNA, CLAL, Hillel and the National Foundation for

²⁴ Koltun, Elizabeth (1976). *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*. New York: Schocken Books.

²⁵ Cantor, Aviva (1978). "The Sheltered Workshop," *Lilith Magazine*, 5, 20-22.

²⁶ Geffen, Rela Mintz (1992). "Women Today – A Non-Orthodox View," in *Frontiers of Jewish Thought*, Stephen Katz, ed. (New York: B'nai Brith), 114.

²⁷ See particularly: Isserman, Nancy and Hostien, Lisa (1994). *Status of Women in Jewish Organizations*. New York: American Jewish Committee.

²⁸ Weiner, Audrey S. (1995). "Women in Jewish Communal Leadership in the 21st Century." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. 71, 2-3, 124-131.

²⁹ Cohen, Steven M., Bronznick, Shifra, Goldenhar, Didi, Israel, Sherry; and Kelner, Shaul (2004). *Creating Gender Equity and Organizational Effectiveness in the Jewish Federation System: A Research-and-Action Project*. New York: Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, 4.

Jewish Culture have male CEOs.³⁰ In a number of organizations more women are reaching No. 2 and No. 3 positions, but are not advancing to the top, particularly in larger organizations and Federations with significant budgets and power.³¹ The Jewish Communal Service Association (JCCA) 1999 Membership Survey found that despite the fact that over a quarter of JCC's have women in their top positions, women throughout the system earn, on average, \$20,000 less than men.³²

Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community in partnership with United Jewish Communities (UJC) conducted a recent study, published in January 2004, to address this continuing lack of equity. The AWP/UJC research explored reasons for this lack and potential interventions to combat the near-absence of women from the highest positions of professional Jewish communal leadership of Federations.³³

The major obstacles found in the study were 1) an insufficient number of women in the leadership pipeline in Federations, 2) male decision-makers who are slow or resistant to recognizing women's skills, and 3) male professional's gender-based assumptions and attitudes. Other obstacles confronting women professionals are the "old boys' network" that continues to influence hiring and promotion patterns, a lack of turnover and promotion at the highest levels of Jewish communal organizations, and the culture of long work hours which often includes night and weekend work. Studies have also found that employers perceive women as less committed to full-time work and less willing to relocate. Yet, one survey of Jewish organizations found almost the same percentage of women working full time as men; furthermore, women cited that the primary reason they worked part time was because their agencies didn't have the funding for full-time positions.³⁴

The AWP/UJC study also highlighted the lack of structural support for balancing work and life in Jewish communal life. As one high level Jewish communal professional has written, "In the Jewish world, where living a Jewish life, raising a Jewish family, and creating a Jewish identity are considered critical to the community's vitality and viability—helping professionals navigate personal and professional responsibilities should be seen as essential."³⁵ Despite this strong argument on behalf of communal support for work/life balance, the Jewish community's track record on family-friendly organizational policies has been far from exemplary.

A recent survey of the personnel policies of eight Jewish organizations across the United States revealed that only two had a paid maternity leave policy that guaranteed an income for longer than

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Isserman and Hostien (1994).

³² Nagy, Eve (2004). "Sulam: A Ladder for Women in Jewish Communal Service." *Journal of Jewish Communal Service, Winter 2004*, 43.

³³ Cohen et al. (2004).

³⁴ Isserman and Hostein (1994).

³⁵ Chazen, Cindy (2002). "Women Hold Up Half the Sky: An Old Chinese Proverb," *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Responsibility, April 2002*, 1-2.

a week.³⁶ According to *Balancing Work and Family in Jewish Non-Profit Organizations*, a comprehensive study of Jewish organizations in Los Angeles published by the Progressive Jewish Alliance in LA, just over half of the organizations studied offered paid maternity leave. The recent Chicago-based SULAM study found that many Jewish professionals in the Chicago area are working flexible schedules but these situations have been arranged on an individual basis and are not institutionalized.³⁷ Yet many believe that the Jewish community is still a relatively good place for parents to work. For example, three-quarters of Jewish professionals in the Philadelphia area were found to believe that their organizations are sensitive to the needs of mothers and women in the workplace.³⁸ The gap between this perception and the obstacles reported by parents deserves further study.

While women rabbis share many of the experiences of other Jewish women professionals, the unique nature of their situation was most recently illuminated through a study published by the Rabbinical Assembly, which documented systemic obstacles to women's achievement in the rabbinate.³⁹ While this study focused on rabbis within the Conservative movement, prior research and anecdotal evidence suggests that gender bias continues to impact women rabbis across denominations.⁴⁰

3.1.2.1 Women Professionals: The American Context

Research into the gender gap in professional arenas throughout North America indicates that Jewish organizations are part of larger systemic trends. Despite slow progress over the past twenty years, women and men are not compensated equally for equivalent jobs above the entry level, they are not advancing at the same pace, and they remain unequally represented at the highest levels of most sectors of American corporate and non-profit work.⁴¹

The Jewish communal world is comparable to the general corporate world. Only 10% of senior managers of Fortune 500 companies are women, and less than 3% of top corporate earners are women.⁴² Women in the corporate world still routinely report sharing their ideas with a group and seeing them credited to others, and studies show that women in the workplace are still perceived more negatively than men.⁴³ Salary gaps between men's and women's salaries are pervasive.⁴⁴

³⁶ Sapiro, Susan (2003). "Choosing Life and Work – Aiming for Balance in the Jewish Community," *Journey, Fall 2003*, 20-25.

³⁷ Sulam: A Ladder for Women in Jewish Communal Service (2004). "A Redaction of Policies and Best Practices for Women in Jewish Communal Service," Jewish Communal Professionals of Chicago, unpublished draft.

³⁸ Isserman and Hostein (1994).

³⁹ Cohen, Steven M. and Schor, Judith (2004). *Gender Variation in the Careers of Conservative Rabbis: A Survey of Rabbis Ordained Since 1985*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly.

⁴⁰ Commission for Women's Equality of the American Jewish Congress (1993). *Highlights of the Survey of Female Rabbis About Sexual Discrimination and Harassment*. New York: American Jewish Congress; Muselah, R. (1994). "Women Rabbis: Turning Newness into Strength," *Na'amat Woman, 1994 May-June*, 4-7, 33-34.

⁴¹ Cohen, et al (2004), p. 6.

⁴² Chronicle of Philanthropy, May 2001, cited in Bronznick, Shifra, "How Women's Leadership Can Transform Our Institutions" (unpublished speech).

⁴³ Valian, Virginia (1999). *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Men's and women's perceptions of what prevents women from achieving top positions have also been found to differ significantly. A Catalyst study of senior women who had advanced within Fortune 1000 companies found discrepancies between what women perceived to be their barriers to advancement and what male CEOs perceived them to be. While women viewed male stereotyping and preconceptions (52%), exclusion from informal networks (49%) and lack of general management or line experience (47%) as barriers, many more men saw lack of general management or line experience as a primary barrier (82%).⁴⁵

Recent research in the public sector has shown that increasing flexibility for employees makes good business sense and does not result in a loss of productivity. A study by the Boston College Center for Work and Family (2000) found that 76% of managers and 81% of employees indicated that offering flexible work arrangements has a positive effect on retention. Employers including Ernst and Young and Prudential Financial have also reported saving millions of dollars by implementing flexible work programs.⁴⁶

3.1.3 Prior Research on Jewish Women Volunteers

The obstacles facing women in the volunteer sector of the Jewish community have also been studied and analyzed since the mid-'70s. In 1993, 30% of the small city chief volunteer officers of Federations were women while 7% of large city Federation presidents were female. Just over a third (34%) of all board members of Federations were women, double the number in 1975 but still well under half.⁴⁷ In 1994, of 45 boards of major national Jewish organizations, six had 6% or fewer women on their boards, 11 had 15% or fewer, and 23 had 25% or fewer. Only 12% had a woman president.⁴⁸

Over the past ten years, Jewish women have achieved some significant milestones— as exemplified by Amy Friedkin, the first female head of AIPAC, and Judy Yudof, the first female head of the United Synagogue of the Conservative movement. Indeed, six national Jewish organizations currently have a female president for the first time.⁴⁹ Yet, out of the 45 national Jewish organizations first studied by Ma'yan in 1994, by 2004, 80% still had fewer than 29% women on their boards, a small improvement from the 86% that had fewer than 29% women on their boards in 1994.⁵⁰ In 2004, 19% of the boards surveyed had a woman president—again, a moderate, yet encouraging increase from 12% in 1994.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Chronicle of Philanthropy, May 2001.

⁴⁵ Kaplan, Meryle Mahrer (2001). "A Tool Kit for Organizational Change," in *JCSA Teleconference 2001: Gender Equality in Jewish Communal Service: Toward a National Action Agenda* (New York: Jewish Communal Service Association).

⁴⁶ Diversity Inc.Com (1999). "Facing the Grail: Confronting the Cost of Work/Family Imbalance." Boston: Boston Bar Association.

⁴⁷ Weiner, Audrey S. (1995) "Women in Jewish Communal Leadership in the 21st Century," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. 71, 2-3, 124-131.

⁴⁸ Ma'yan (1998).

⁴⁹ AIPAC, JAFI, JESNA, Jewish Museum, ADL and USCJ.

⁵⁰ Previous research in the corporate and non-profit arenas has shown that minorities are commonly perceived through the lens of their minority status and therefore more negatively than participants in a group who are part of the majority.

There is conflicting research about the effect of full-time work on women's volunteer lives. A 1990 study found that women who worked part-time volunteered more than those who did not work at all.⁵² This finding was in keeping with the general trend among American women, for whom volunteer participation was higher among employed women (56%) than among unemployed women (47%).⁵³ The number of children a mother had at home was also found to have little impact on her communal involvement in the Jewish community.⁵⁴ In contrast to these findings, *Power and Parity* found that Jewish women volunteers who worked full time were the least likely (compared to women who were not employed or were employed part time, and compared to men) to feel that they were making a significant impact on their organizations. They were also the least likely to serve on multiple boards and the least likely to become officers. This study also found that 65% of female board members under the age of 52 of national organizations worked full time in 1994, a dramatic increase from previous patterns of employment for both men and women volunteers.⁵⁵

Many researchers have concluded that Jewish women, and women in general, have different approaches to philanthropy, fundraising, and volunteering from those of men.⁵⁶ Women philanthropists often view themselves as “doers” while they perceive men as “delegators.” Women use philanthropic involvement to build connections with other donors and with recipients, and they perceive men as using philanthropy to gain or assert social status.⁵⁷ Though some studies have found that women are more likely than men to be involved as members of Jewish organizations,⁵⁸ at least one study found that non-Jewish organizations have a far greater attraction on the volunteer energy of Jewish women than do Jewish organizations.⁵⁹

3.2 General Findings on Women's Jewish Communal Leadership

When focus group participants discussed barriers to women as Jewish communal leaders, they referred to their experiences and perceptions in a variety of settings, including lay and professional life, traditional large institutions and newer smaller organizations, women's organizations,

In fact, extensive research by Rosabeth Moss Kanter has shown that, at least in the corporate world, women must make up a third of a board in order to overcome the status of tokens and instead operate as full participants of the group. See: Kanter, Rosabeth Moss (1993) *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

⁵¹ Ma'yan (1998).

⁵² Goldstein, Alice (1990). “New Roles, New Commitment? Jewish Women's Involvement in the Community's Organizational Structure,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 72 (Spring).

⁵³ Independent Sector (1996). *Giving and Volunteering in the United States*. Washington DC.

⁵⁴ Goldstein (1990).

⁵⁵ Ma'yan (1998).

⁵⁶ Schneider, Susan Weidman (1993). “Jewish Women's Philanthropy,” *Lilith Magazine*, Winter 1993, 6-12, 29, 39; Gold, Steven J. (1997). “Women's Changing Place in Jewish Philanthropy,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 18, 60-75.

⁵⁷ Gold (1997).

⁵⁸ Hartman, Moshe and Hartman, Harriet (1996); Goldstein, A and Goldstein, S. (1998). *Conservative Jewry in the United States: A Socio-Demographic Profile*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Davidman, Lynn and Tenenbaum, Shelly (1994). “Feminist Sociology and American Jews,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

⁵⁹ Fishman, Sylvia Barack (1991). *Doing It All: The "New" American Jewish Woman, Her Education, Labor Force Activities, and Jewish Communal Participation: A Profile Drawing on Data from the 1990 Jewish Population Study*. Paper prepared for the Third Annual Sydney Hollander Memorial Conference, Los Angeles.

synagogues, Jewish academic institutions, and informal educational settings such as youth groups and summer camps. Participants defined the term “Jewish leaders” broadly to include professional heads of organizations, lay leaders, philanthropists, activists, recognized scholars and rabbis, and others who speak and write about the Jewish community in public arenas.

While participants saw issues like board composition and professional leadership as very significant, focus group discussions revealed that individuals who do not work in the Jewish community or are not active volunteers are less aware of who holds particular positions and more concerned about who is highlighted as a visible symbol of authority in their communities. These “informal” leaders are individuals in the Jewish community profiled in the media and regarded as experts; they are the ones invited to keynote conferences, speak as scholars-in-residence, and receive other community honors.

While there are significant differences in the issues faced by professional women, lay women, rabbis, scholars and other communal leaders, common threads run through the words and experiences of all these women. The primary common theme is the glass ceiling.

3.2.1 The Persistence of the Glass Ceiling

- 70% of survey respondents believe that women are underrepresented as community leaders.

Over two-thirds of focus group participants believe that women are under-represented as leaders in the Jewish community. While some report that women occupy numerous positions of leadership in their local communities, the majority of focus group participants also bemoan the persistence of major obstacles to women who seek to join the highest echelons of communal leadership and recognition, particularly at the national level. They report the persistence of “glass ceilings” in a wide variety of Jewish organizational settings.

Glass Ceilings in Jewish Communal Life	
Federation	<i>There is definitely a glass ceiling among Jewish communal professionals... Communities love to point to the fact that, "Oh, yes, we had a woman president of our Federation, or a major-gifts director, or whatever." But there is not yet one major city in America that has had a woman exec.</i>
Jewish social service agency	<i>I hope to eventually be an executive director of a Jewish agency. There are very limited women in that position now. Most of them are the "No. 2's." While this is a very female-dominated field and profession, most of our visionary leaders and managers are not women.</i>
Other national organizations	<i>The ADL and Federation have women coming out of the woodwork everywhere, doing work, doing the legwork, writing the press releases, doing everything. And the leadership is always male at the highest levels.</i>
Hillel	<i>I partly work for national Hillel. There are glass ceilings... Yet there has also been a lot of movement ...</i>
Jewish academia	<i>We do see, at the university level, at the Seminary... there are very few women who have full professorships.</i>
Jewish education	<i>I'm involved in our central agency for Jewish education, which is a very interesting organization. The women are 99 percent of the pyramid, but the men are still clearly the top percent. That's very true in the Jewish world, if you look at who our principals are in this community of all our day schools. Not in the congregational schools [which] have much less power in the community...</i>
Summer camp	<i>I spent years as a camp counselor at Jewish summer camp. The head of everything—the head counselor, the head whatever—was always a guy. There was always this guys' club in charge.</i>
Youth group	<i>[She] ran for religion education vice president of international USY. The sole reason [she] lost was because... there were certain people who were from certain areas of the United States that were still very traditional and didn't think that women should be [in that role].</i>

3.2.2 Women Leaders Are Prominent in Local Settings and Liberal Synagogues

While most focus group participants perceived a dearth of women in leadership, some board members of liberal synagogues and some women who have reached the top lay leadership of their local Federations cited a lack of barriers to women's leadership, at least on the local level. Many said they had no idea what was true on a national level. Others distinguished between their communities and the national arena or between less powerful organizations where women's leadership was more likely and more powerful organizations where women still face significant obstacles.

On the local level and in the Temples I've been involved with, yes, there's plenty of women's leadership. But on the national level, it's really different.

Focus group discussions also seemed to indicate egalitarian synagogues in which Jewish women have assumed religious leadership as rabbis and/or congregation members are among the institutions where women experience the fullest access to lay and professional leadership.

I don't know if that's because of the Reform movement, or if my experience has been unusual, but when I think of leaders in the Jewish community, the images that come to my mind are women. My congregation in California has a woman rabbi. She was hired relatively recently, but there have always been a lot of women leaders in my Jewish life.

As far as everything, I feel that Jewish girls (sic) dominated Temple. The Jewish mothers did everything. Men just sat back and watched. The Sisterhood always had much more going on, raised much more money. You always heard about them and not about the men.

Somewhat paradoxically, these perceptions of a proliferation of women leaders on the local level can lead individuals to underestimate the persistence of discrimination against women in the national arena. These perceptions also might explain some women's choices to be involved locally rather than nationally.

For the issue of women's communal leadership to become a top priority in the Jewish community, individuals will have to be educated about the difference between their local experiences of women's leadership and the national picture.

3.2.3 *Widespread Belief that Women's Leadership--and Feminist Leadership--Makes a Difference*

From a list of six priorities for areas of Jewish life in need of attention, over half of survey respondents ranked "advocating for women's leadership" as the highest or second highest priority. Many focus group participants expressed the belief that more women leaders could make a significant difference in the Jewish community's future direction and priorities.

I think the leadership issue is enormous, because after that things start to trickle down... Then so many of the issues that are important to women, and should be important to everybody, and are important to a lot of men, would be on the agenda in a more focused way.

I don't think there are enough women in leadership – in synagogue leadership, in Jewish communal leadership – and I don't believe that we'll really succeed in making change until there are women at the top of leadership who will help make those changes.

Furthermore, many believe that more women leaders would bring important issues to the forefront. They experience the lack of women in positions of national leadership as an issue of content as well as numbers.

We underestimate how powerful it is when you are raised in a world where all the positions of authority are filled by men.

[If there were more women leaders] I think we might have a different focus... more of the women's issues getting automatically addressed because they bubble up... [issues like] pro-choice and day care. The woman is usually the caregiver for an elderly parent; if she's not the immediate caregiver, the care manager. Any and all of those

issues would bubble up. Or connecting with the women in Israel as a movement. It's a natural, a no-brainer.

This optimism about women's transformative leadership was not universally shared. Some women with many years of experience on boards and in professional settings shared examples of women in power who did not lead in a way that "automatically" helped other women.

I call it "the Golda Syndrome." Women get into power positions and they forget they're women, they forget the status of anybody slightly below them, and they try to be one of the boys.

For some, these experiences of women who become "one of the boys" simply amplify the need to advocate for more feminists in positions of power, not just more women. Some cautioned focus group participants not to assume that "if there's a female president, everything will be better," noting that "it still depends who it is."

In many spheres, and mostly in Jewish Family Service agencies, there are women who become executive directors. Does that mean they have the consciousness? Not necessarily.

You see a lot of women's faces in the top leadership positions, but it's not the ones you want.

Such an emphasis suggests that looking at issues of women and leadership should not be simply a matter of gender equity or achieving numerical parity, but also a matter of raising feminist consciousness among female and male leaders.

As more women and more feminist-identified women and men do manage to enter leadership positions in the Jewish community, they will have the opportunity to move beyond the still critically important issue of "bean counting." They will be able to focus on questions of what feminist leadership – personified by both women and men – can and should look like, and how it can help the Jewish community embody its own highest values. Most focus group participants believed women's leadership will make a difference—this finding supports the efforts of those laboring to achieve a higher representation of women at all levels of communal leadership.

3.2.4 Under-Representation of Women as Scholars and Speakers

- 88% of survey respondents indicated they are upset when women are under-represented as scholars and speakers in the Jewish community.

Some focus group participants spoke of experiencing a profound sense of discouragement each time they see a new panel or conference organized without adequate representation of women. In response to a recent high-profile conference with no women scholars represented, one academic commented, "*It feels like the women's movement never happened, with a program like that.*" A synagogue board member expressed a similar sentiment, sharing her frustration when attending events in which "some woman has organized it and some man moderates it, and we're lost."

Focus group participants reported that many of their male colleagues, and many women as well, seem blind to the implications of creating panels with inadequate female representation. A professor at a major Jewish institution shared the following illustrative anecdote:

I got invited by the dean ...we had very few women coming in this year—and we talked. He said to me, "You've got to help me make [women] aware how open we are to having women students." I said, "Look at your orientation program. There are eleven content sessions and one is by a woman. What message do you think you're giving?"

3.2.5 Tokenism and Pigeon-holing

While many focus group participants indicated that the issue of fair representation of women is very important to them, they also spoke eloquently about the problem of token representation. Previous research in the corporate and non-profit arenas has shown, when minorities are added to a majority group at token levels, they are commonly perceived through the lens of their minority status by the majority.⁶⁰ More specifically, research has indicated that, at least in the corporate world, women must make up a third of a board in order to overcome the status of tokens and establish themselves as full participants of the group.⁶¹

Focus group participants who were Jewish educators, lay leaders, rabbis and academics spoke about the experience of being the token woman on a board or panel. They emphasized the importance of aiming beyond token inclusion of women and towards full integration.

I was recently asked about giving a lecture. They've been having these lectures for 15 years and they haven't had a single woman. Someone suggested it would be good to have a woman do it. So tokenism is really alive and well.

...Men will feel absolutely free to tell you that they're inviting you to do something, or offering you a position, because a donor gave them money saying, "We want to see a woman on the faculty," or something like that... On the one hand, we want to have more women; on the other hand, that notion that we really want you because you're a woman... At least you should get real embarrassed to express that.

Some women are willing to accept being the only woman on a board or panel, because they feel organizations have to start somewhere.

Nobody can make me a token, unless I choose to be. In other words, if I feel my voice is something that I want to contribute to that particular organization, then I don't care why they chose me.

I think we have put the Jewish community in a no-win situation... The patriarchal leadership of the community... has been forced—because I don't think it was so willing...—to include women, and then all the barriers that were traditionally there are breaking down

⁶⁰ Bronznick, Shifra (2002). "From the Sticking Point to the Tipping Point," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Fall 2002, 48.

⁶¹ Kanter (1993).

in terms of age and gender and sexual preference ... [so] "enlightened" organizations... need to... include a little bit of everybody. That means, if I'm asked to be on a board because they really are looking for a middle-aged woman, then I have two options. I can either say, "Cool! Good for you, you're including me," or "You're only taking me because of this." So they're in a no-win situation.

One woman shared an anecdote about being offered a position on a board. She accepted the position, but tried to change the board from within by refusing to limit her involvement to the issues the board saw as women's issues.

The executive director took me out to lunch. You know, it's a very old institution and a very old board. He said, "Over the years, we have always had one very powerful woman on every board. I look forward to seeing you develop into that powerful woman. Your role will be to deal with the educational aspects." I said, "I'm not awfully keen on the educational aspects. I think I'd rather be involved in the budget."

Women scholars and lay leaders also spoke of their experiences of being pigeon-holed. Female scholars are often assumed to be the only ones who can speak about women's issues, and they are often asked to speak about women's issues even if this is not their primary area of expertise. When an organization seeks a speaker to address a topic of wide-ranging significance in the Jewish community, women are often overlooked.

[There is] the notion that if you're a woman and you're being asked to speak some place, surely you want to speak on a woman's issue. And surely it must be a woman to do that.

Stereotypes about gender and age also affect the reception of younger female scholars. As one new professor who lectures about traditional Jewish texts said,

I have situations even now where I'll go to certain synagogue groups in certain settings [and] there is a mentality of, "Oh, isn't that cute... that women can come talk about these things?"

Focus group participants suggested several proactive strategies for countering these obstacles and increasing the prominence and visibility of women speakers and scholars in the Jewish community. One young professional offered the following vision of a systematic way of responding to programs and panels that exclude women.

I wish there were some kind of police we could call when these things came up... If there was this Ma'yan feminist police that you could call, you could take some kind of communal action and a whole group could call the board members of the organization and pressure them to move beyond "We're trying very hard to find a woman" and actually make a change in the program.

Whether or not "policing" is the most effective plan of action, such a systematized format for responding to unrepresentative panels and programs would serve feminists who are frustrated with continued egregious examples of the community's lack of awareness. It could also help promote

change by channeling anger and frustration into strategic interventions with targeted organizations and individuals. The creation of a systematic mechanism for response would also enable more documentation, which could be useful for evaluating and measuring change in this area.

3.2.6 *Women's Issues Not Adequately Represented in Media*

- 68% of survey respondents indicated they believe the Jewish media does an inadequate job reporting on women's issues.

The Jewish media was another communal arena with which focus group participants voiced dissatisfaction in terms of gender issues. Some expressed the belief that increasing the representation of women and women's issues in Jewish news sources could be one key to creating more inclusion and to promoting women's leadership.

Get more faces of progressive Jewish women in the media, in mainstream Jewish community stuff, but all over the place to really highlight women leaders.

...[We need to] make it so there is a public face that can include people who are like us.

3.3 *Findings on Jewish Women Communal Professionals*

Among the 134 focus group participants who work as paid employees and professionals in the Jewish community, many spoke of Jewish communal work as a mixed experience for women.⁶² While these women highly value their work in the Jewish community, they also report that each step on the life course of Jewish communal work can be marred by inequitable practices: interviewing for a job, negotiating the salary for a position, professional development while on the job, possibilities for advancement, and the ongoing struggle to balance life and work.

3.3.1 *Widespread Experience of Gender Inequality*

The majority of focus group participants who work in the Jewish community have experienced some form of gender discrimination in the workplace.

- Over half (52%) of survey respondents who work as professionals in the Jewish community have experienced pay inequity, discrimination or sexual harassment.

Some focus group participants indicated that their desire to eradicate discrimination from the Jewish community is an essential part of how they understand their roles in Jewish communal life.

In the organized Jewish community, men's and women's opinions and skills are treated differently. It is frustrating. From everything from pay to how our opinions are sought to the kind of personal information that comes about or doesn't come about. So I really

⁶² Some of the experiences of Jewish women communal workers related below only affect women and others are more universal issues in Jewish organizations and the non-profit world.

feel my role as a Jewish woman is to be a leader in the community and in my workplace. That drives me, very much so.

Some of those who have struggled for change drew hope from the fact they have seen progress over the course of their careers.

Despite some of my frustrations about the Jewish community, I've definitely felt that my voice has been included a lot in my workplace. It's taken a lot of time and a lot of voice, but I definitely feel included.

Others openly questioned whether real progress was possible. They also questioned the long-term personal costs of choosing to continue “the struggle.” These professionals described feeling worn down by a system that changes very slowly and often leaves them weary and isolated.

I don't know how much I really want to fight to knock down some of that hierarchy. Five years ago, I was knocking on that wall. Now I just want to get up tomorrow morning.

Why would you choose a career that not only demeans you as a woman by not paying you as much as the men get, but also you have miserable hours and don't have a family life? I could go on.

3.3.2 Leaving Jewish Communal Work Due to Persistent Sexism

Focus group participants who had formerly worked in the Jewish community reported that persistent sexism was one of the major factors that influenced them to seek work outside the Jewish community.

In my early adult life and career, I was a Jewish communal professional. When I was doing the work, even up to just a few years ago, I felt pretty intensely discriminated against as a woman. I couldn't get paid the same as my male counterparts. I couldn't achieve positions of leadership that men I knew, who had similar experience, or nowhere near the amount of experience that I had, could achieve. In everyday respect, in collegial respect, it was not the same as it was for the men. Getting out of it, spiritually and as a feminist, was the best thing I ever did.

A young woman who had been extremely involved in Jewish communal work throughout her college years and twenties expressed similar feelings of relief about no longer working in the Jewish community. She stated, “I feel pretty through working in the Jewish community . . . I feel I'm done with that.” When probed as to the reasons for her exit from Jewish communal life, she explained, “For me, it was sexism and ageism coupled together.”

The voices of these women, who have made the often difficult decision to leave Jewish communal life due to their experiences of sexism, serve as a warning signal to all who care about the retention of talented Jewish communal professionals.

3.3.3 Pay Inequity

Focus group participants perceived the lack of equitable pay for women professionals, and the low salaries for most entry level and mid-management positions, as major barriers to women's equality and job satisfaction in the Jewish workplace. Almost half (43%) of the Jewish professionals surveyed had experienced pay inequity working in the Jewish community.

If you apply for a job in the Jewish communal world and you're a woman, they just lower the salary. . . they will automatically pay men more. . . . It doesn't mean there aren't women who are making significant money, but I truly believe if there was a male counterpart in many of these positions, they'd be making more money.

I always joke, maybe we're all women because men wouldn't work for this salary.

Focus group participants noted the structural inequalities of women's pay scales are part of a larger strategy that keeps Jewish organizations afloat financially.

A lot of Jewish organizations . . . manage to make their budgets work because they get women to work there and get paid less.

The Jewish community is profiting off the underpaid labor of women.

Some focus group participants expressed the belief the Jewish community gets away with paying women less, in part because it falls back on outdated assumptions about Jewish women.

I think some of it is possibly also upper-middle-class, upper-class ideas about men and women. There's a lot of expectations in a lot of organizations: "Is okay, her husband must be making a lot of money."

Such assumptions ignore the reality of the diversity of economic realities in which Jewish women live. Single women, lesbians, divorced or widowed women, as well as women with male partners might be primary or sole breadwinners, and any of these women could have dependents including children or aging parents.

Pay inequity also manifests through double standards for educational achievement. Some participants shared their perception that in order for women to make top salaries in Jewish organizations they are expected to have doctorates or rabbinic ordination, qualifications that not all men making high salaries have met. This double standard disadvantages women who have many years of experience but have not followed traditional career paths, in part because, until recently, not all these paths were open to them as women.

Participants also noted that women are often expected to speak without payment. One woman specifically reported being told that she had been invited to speak without honorarium because the congregation had spent its money the previous year on a male speaker.

While the existence of pay inequity is a reality for women professionals, it is also difficult to substantiate.

You never really know, because it's not a transparent system. You push it to be a transparent system, but it's not. So it's hard to call anybody on it.

One way to confront this lack of “proof” is to begin systematic data collection on salaries and positions of Jewish professionals. The AWP/UJC research team is undertaking this task as part of its Gender Equity Initiative. When this data is collected and made public, it will serve as an important model for other data collection initiatives in other organizations. It will also provide a baseline from which to measure progress as proactive interventions are adopted.

Anecdotal evidence from focus groups suggested direct confrontation and coaching can help women negotiate salaries on par with men’s salaries. One executive shared a triumphant story of demanding and obtaining the salary she knew had been offered to a man who had turned down her position. The details of the story indicate that direct confrontation can work, if women are armed with the facts and are willing to shame lay leaders into recognizing their unjust practices. In addition, a recently ordained female rabbi pointed to the difference it made to have received specific advice and mentoring about negotiating her salary and demanding the same salary as her male counterparts. Her experience emphasizes the importance of training and mentoring women on salary negotiation issues. Many professionals who participated in the focus groups indicated they felt that they could benefit greatly from more training in such arenas.

3.3.4 Discriminatory Hiring Practices

Despite legal provisions that prohibit interviewers from asking women about their personal lives, these practices persist in Jewish organizations and synagogues. Jewish professionals and rabbis reported they have been asked during interviews if they were planning to have children. Some were explicitly told not to have children.

When I was looking for a job two years ago and interviewing with several major Jewish organizations. . . the worst case was a Jewish women’s organization. I was in my mid-thirties and recently married. They would all ask me, did I plan to have a family. I would make some remark like, “Thank you so much for asking. I plan to work full-time and I’ve committed to applying for this job because I feel I can do it.” In this one women’s organization, very devoted to women’s reproductive issues, I was meeting with senior officers and volunteer officers. They would not let go of the question: “Are you going to have children? Are you going to have children? Are you going to have children?” It was such an eye-opener about how often this happens.

Such questioning is clearly illegal. It also reflects an institutional culture more interested in saving money than in creating family-friendly working environments.

3.3.5 *Women's Leadership Received Differently*

Jewish women professionals report their leadership is often responded to and resisted in ways clearly influenced by gendered assumptions. According to focus group participants, both men and women resist the authority of women.

Often people do not want to hear women say no. . . . They will take that from a man, because that's what he said. It's no and we walk away and we're done. But if a woman says no, they will not accept it.

Focus group participants also shared experiences of having had their leadership measured against a set of assumptions about how women are supposed to act.

Women are still expected to lead in certain kinds of ways which have to do with being high on the "gracious, welcoming, embracing, ladylike." And if you don't do it that way, you're very quickly seen as "the bitch." I think there are constraints in that – that men do not have to be so self-aware and so self-monitoring about how they come off when they're advocating for positions or in a leadership stance.

As focus group participants explained, this is an obstacle to women's leadership.

3.3.6 *Organizational Culture Resistant to Feminism*

The culture of much of Jewish organizational life is resistant to feminism, even when it embraces individual women. Some women professionals reported their male colleagues do not prioritize gender issues and do not even understand what it would really mean to commit to supporting women in their organizations.

I've . . . encountered a lot of men leaders who don't think they need to take on sexism as an issue. It's not that they are blatantly being sexist, or doing things where they really don't care about women per se, but they are really clueless about it.

Focus group participants described experiencing the support of their male colleagues on an individual basis yet encountering resistance to openly raising feminist and gender issues. One woman who worked at a Bureau of Jewish Education (BJE) described giving a *d'var torah* to a group of her mostly male colleagues. While the room listened to her with rapt attention and thus appeared supportive of her taking on the (nontraditional) role of a teacher of Torah, when she cited a feminist commentary, the men began to laugh and snicker aloud. This experience highlighted for her the difference between being accepted as a woman and having feminism taken seriously.

It's [accepting of] feminism in terms of, okay, there's this hierarchy in place and now we're going to get some women to slide themselves into that role. I see that a lot in terms of Jewish academics. There's a certain amount of acceptance to women becoming Jewish thinkers, but thinking in the exact same way that Jewish men have been thinking for the past however many thousands of years. But when you come in saying, "The fact

that I am a feminist means that I am going to look at every single text I'm given, I'm going to look at every single historical source that I'm given, I'm going to look at the very way the Jewish studies department treats its employees and its students and its graduate students. All of that is going to have to change because I'm coming from this perspective." That's when you get, "Why are you so angry? What's wrong with you?" Just being a female body in that structure. . . It's different when I use feminism as a challenge than just being a woman in a certain role.

While many participants made a point of saying they believed men could be feminists and had experienced the support of male feminists in their lives, many also spoke about the resistance of men in Jewish workplaces to fully supporting feminism. Some men were perceived as openly hostile to feminism while others were described as quietly supportive but unwilling to advocate openly for feminist issues.

3.3.7 *Lack of Mentoring and Role Models*

Many focus group participants who work as Jewish communal professionals reported they had not been adequately mentored. The consequences of male leaders' preference to mentor other men and the paucity of women in high positions leave women at a disadvantage in relation to their male counterparts.

One of the effects of having mostly men in top positions of power is that they often reach out to men in lower positions and mentor them rather than reaching out to women...

I think there is a way in which men relate better to men, or are more likely to seek out men as their mentees, as their protégés, and that men are much more in positions of power. So there is a professionally self-fulfilling phenomenon there. I see it in really subtle ways – whether it's faculty at conferences, or who gets tapped to go on a faster trajectory professionally. These are all people who would overtly say, "Of course there could be women in those positions," but the way it plays out in the social/professional network. . . I see it all the time on the podia – who's up there in front at virtually every conference, event, benefit.

As a Jewish communal professional, what I've felt a lot through my experience working in the Jewish community was that there were very few role models for me as a woman in strong professional leadership roles....

While the lack of mentoring particularly affected women in middle management positions and higher, women in lower and entry level positions and in institutions with more women in leadership reported the presence of women in higher positions had contributed to a positive working environment for them. They also indicated that when mentorship was available to them it made a difference.

I've worked in several different Jewish communal organizations. I have always had really good experiences. My last job was at the JCC, where all the senior level positions were held by women. Before that, in many organizations the most senior people were men, but

since I've always been in entry-level, my supervisors were always women and often great mentors who were great role models and great supervisors.

One professional shared how seeking out a female mentor had helped her gain confidence in her own sense of possibilities for advancement.

Something I did do, which ended up being wonderful, was that I actually sought out a mentor . . . someone who I could meet with, talk with, help me move to the next level, if I wanted to and talk through some of the issues I was experiencing as a Jewish woman in the Jewish community. . . For me, that was an experience that really made a difference. I think it's a challenge. As a professional, it is very difficult. Men really do hold most of the major positions on the executive level.

Others cautioned that setting up mentorship relationships can be tricky. One young focus group participant shared her experience of difficult relationships with women higher up on the professional ladder.

I feel there's a generational tension between, say, women who are in their twenties and early thirties and women who are in their forties and fifties. Right now, at this point in history, because of the course of the feminist movement and the battles that were fought for our generation that make our lives much easier now, I think there is a lot of unspoken resentment and disappointment, just a lot of baggage around intergenerational women's relations that I found play out in the workplace and in other places.

Another focus group participant who had gone to male rabbis and communal leaders seeking advice about pursuing careers in Jewish communal life shared this story about a kind of “reverse mentorship:”

I remember the rabbi from my congregation at home and my rabbi at the Hillel that I was affiliated with in college – both said to me – and they were both men, that they didn't think I would feel comfortable in Jewish leadership because of the current strictures on women's progress. The example he gave was that Federation doesn't even give paid maternity leave for the women working there. . . Always in the back of my mind, I always thought maybe I'd be a rabbi, or go into other positions. But that pushed me away from any real option.

These anecdotal accounts suggest that some male professionals, who are sensitive to the difficulties of the rabbinate and communal leadership for women, have chosen to express that sensitivity by advising young women to choose other careers. Such men might be alerted to the ways in which this advice can serve to maintain rather than challenge the status quo. Potential male mentors might consider offering young women information about attempts to improve Jewish communal life for women and/or enlisting themselves in such efforts.

3.3.8 Lack of Better-Coordinated Strategy

Focus group participants noted the lack of a coordinated strategy between sympathetic

professionals and lay leaders around gender issues. As one professional expressed it, “We don’t actually band together and push anything.” These women felt that there was no way to let volunteer women, for example, know that it would make sense for them to get themselves on the nominating committee and coordinate a plan for nominating women to the board. They highlighted the fact that even with a female president, women’s issues often remain stagnant unless women take proactive measures “to talk about where are our voices and how . . . our voices impact the work that we do – no matter what organization we currently find ourselves in.” Many women believed collective strategies and initiatives would yield results. As one woman stated with confidence, to the general agreement of her peers,

If a group of women got together and strategized and had a five-year plan, at the end of the five years you’d get something.

One possible obstacle to women strategizing with one another is the fact some women feel protective of their jobs and sometimes of their organizations as well, and are wary of the consequences of sharing negative experiences. Other participants shared their sense that the Jewish communal world is very small and thus confidentiality is a hard thing to request and to trust. This keeps women from sharing their experiences of obstacles and creates an environment in which negative experiences of professionals and lay leaders are often guarded as secrets. This atmosphere is not conducive to women working together for change. In fact, as one professional put it, “it really holds us back.”

Results of the AWP/UJC Research Report further suggest that alliances between lay and professional women can be hampered in some cities by tensions between women volunteers and those who work for pay. In addition, it was found that some women lay leaders hold back from advocacy on behalf of professional women in order to maintain their own reputations among male leaders.⁶³

3.3.9 Other Obstacles to Advancement

Other obstacles to women’s advancement as Jewish communal professionals include women’s lack of connections, lack of a sense of entitlement and some discomfort with the lack of professionalism in many Jewish organizations. Some young female professionals also reported feeling they were constantly having to prove their competency to their male superiors, and were therefore less likely to ask for the support necessary to develop leadership. Young women also reported being saddled with more administrative tasks than their male counterparts, limiting their opportunity to attend to other elements of their work that might lead more directly to advancement.

I’ve observed that men professionals seem to see their job and their resources much more broadly, and are more likely, in the capacity of their job, to find ways to gain the skills on the clock of their job, or I see my male colleagues much more likely to see something that they do as part of their work and, therefore, submit the receipt, or use time or funds Therefore, my sense is that, even on the job, never mind how you’re

⁶³ Cohen et al. (2004), 12.

brought up, or what you get in school – women have had a harder time gaining additional skills they might need.

Some focus group participants also indicated the lack of professionalism in the Jewish organizations in which they worked had created an uncomfortable working environment for them. One young woman suggested the *haimish*, family-like atmosphere in her office made it too easy for colleagues and superiors to cross the line into inappropriate behavior and speech.

It happens a lot, a certain lack of professionalism in the Jewish institutional world. People feel very comfortable asking you a lot about your personal life, asking questions that I don't necessarily feel comfortable answering. They can lull you in with a little phrase that your Bubbe used, and then they feel really comfortable asking about something like your birth control. . . . Everyone wants to feel at home in certain ways. It's nice. . . on one level. . . but the haimish gets to a point where it really feels like a violence.

Such anecdotes suggest that the culture of Jewish organizations needs to be further examined and analyzed to seek ways to create an environment conducive to the comfort and success of its diverse workforce.

3.3.10 *Desire for Support on Barriers to Professional Leadership*

There is a need for further support for Jewish women leaders in the diverse professional settings in which they find themselves. These women want communal support in the form of advocacy but they also want assistance in identifying and acquiring particular skills that would help them advance to the next tier in their professions.

I think there are certain technical subjects—whether it's fundraising or negotiation or becoming a non-profit or negotiating the tenure process—we could all identify in our own fields what those professional issues are. I certainly think, if we are going to advocate women's leadership, we have to do more than just advocate it; we have to facilitate it, train women to help make it possible... So I would hope to see some thinking about how Ma'yan or other institutions could become training centers that would facilitate women's leadership.

One focus group participant suggested the creation of an ethical code of conduct that could be adopted by employers in the Jewish communal organizations.

I have a dream that will probably never happen of there being some sort of ethical workers' union, or some sort of ethical code for workers in the Jewish communal world, where there would be agreement that, as a group, we will not work at a place—just to give one example—that treats pregnancy and childbirth like a disease and gives you severance for it; or we will not work at a place that doesn't give a living wage and proper benefits to all of its workers. An ethical union that's above and beyond what even can be demanded by unions in this country because it's part of what should be an ethical community.

Significant support was also expressed for the creation of a Ma'yan Report Card on Jewish organizations. Four-fifths (80%) of focus group participants who identified as working in the Jewish community, as employees or volunteers, indicated that they would use such a report card.

I'm really enthusiastic about the idea mentioned in the survey about the report card on Jewish organizations and where they stand on benefits and what their leadership is in terms of administration and boards. Really getting that out there to the wider Jewish world, not just necessarily the Ma'yan mailing list of feminists and their allies. Having it be out there in a serious way that would be taken seriously. I always have this feeling in many areas that if regular people knew what was going on, they might change their practices in terms of the basic work.

3.4 Work/Life Balance

Focus group participants frequently raised the issue of work/life balance. This issue affects all who work in the Jewish community, regardless of gender or family status. Whether or not they themselves were parents, many focus group participants expressed the belief the typical schedule of a top professional in the Jewish community is not healthy, not reflective of Jewish values, and not efficient. They suggested a new work ethic and a better approach to time, even if introduced by women, would be beneficial to all Jewish communal professionals regardless of gender or family status.

Everybody wore this badge of courage, how sickly out of whack their lives were... I can't tell you how many rooms I've been in with "I haven't seen my spouse/child [or] talk[ed] to another person outside this office in ten years." It's not okay. I don't think it's a Jewish ethic. It's ultimately why I chose to leave the position I was in, because even with the boundaries I set, it was still hard to do it the way I wanted to . . . I think the voices of women are the voices that are going to make this change. However gendered or not gendered this issue is, I think that's how it's going to change.

Focus group participants also reported a lack of institutionalized support for working parents in the Jewish organizations in which they worked.

There are certain expectations that, while we promote family, family, family ...there is that expectation that you're going to be there for X number of hours plus. If you allow it to happen, your life is no longer your own. You are the one who has to find the balance, because you're just sucked dry.

We have a long way to go as far as women working in the Jewish community and raising Jewish families.

Many focus group participants would like to see some organization address the gap between the needs and expectations for workplace flexibility and the reality of their workplace policies. They would welcome organizational support and advocacy on behalf of more supportive policies. Such initiatives could begin to reframe the personal challenge of achieving work/life balance as a communal responsibility.

3.4.1 Full Support for Progressive Workplace Policies; Reality Far Behind Goals

- 100% of survey respondents believe that Jewish organizations need to implement progressive policies for their employees (e.g. health care, partner benefits, parental leave). Yet, according to survey results, most do not offer benefits beyond healthcare for the employee herself.

As an employee of the Jewish Community, does your workplace provide?	
Healthcare	71%
Pension	50%
Spousal Benefits	34%
Paid Parental Leave	28%
Childcare or Tuition Subsidy	24%
Same Sex Partner Benefits	13%

One professional shared her experience of coming up against gender stereotypes while trying to obtain health insurance for her family.

In one of my previous jobs, I was negotiating a contract and I wanted family health insurance. A lengthy discussion ensued with the chairman of the congregation, who considered himself an unparalleled feminist and progressive, about "Why should we pay for your husband's health insurance? What benefits does he get at his job?" On and on and on. That was one of these issues. The fact that I was the rabbi of the congregation for five years [didn't seem to matter] ... I think these issues are very prevalent and powerful.

Another professional shared her experience of facing opposition from both men and women within her agency when she tried to advocate for more progressive policies.

I work for [a huge agency that] does not have benefits for gays and lesbians [and] does not allow flexible working hours. Two of my colleagues just had twin girls. They wanted each to take a day to stay home with the children, and work at home... absolutely unheard of and not allowed. Health benefits – if you have a partner, not allowed. It's unbelievable to me! I find myself in the position of having to fight my male executives and my female executives.

In fact, a few focus group participants themselves argued that although they would like to provide benefits and flexibility in their organizations, they believed it would be too costly for their agencies to do so.

3.4.2 Lack of Institutionalized Support for Working Parents

Focus group participants who receive childcare benefits or flex time in their workplaces usually attribute these policies to a supportive supervisor and believe the situation would

be different if they worked elsewhere, even within the same organization. Focus group participants also indicated that they have had to be willing to compromise in terms of salary and status in order to secure jobs with more flexible hours.

It would be nice if people could move up and have supportive, wonderful bosses like I do who are cognizant of family and priorities and what's important in life. I think that most people don't have that.

Because of the absence of institutionalized policies, individuals who are granted flexibility can be made to feel indebted to benevolent bosses.

To the degree that I've been accommodated, I pay for it so much that I don't seek out other kinds of accommodations that would really make it easier for me to synthesize my life as a [professional] and my life as a mother, because I feel, to the degree that I have a little bit of accommodation, I pay for it all the time.

3.4.3 *Work/Life Issues and Single Women*

Focus group participants reported that the issue of work/life balance in the Jewish community is one that affects all employees regardless of whether or not they have dependents. Yet they also reported Jewish organizations which offer flexibility for parents sometimes compensate by placing an unfair burden on single women and women without children, who are expected to have fewer time constraints. Because the Jewish community still places such a high value on children, exceptions are made for parents that are often not made for individuals.

To be a single woman in the Jewish communal workplace was to be discriminated against in all areas. Most important, there was an expectation of time that was different from other women who were married and had no children, or married with children. The expectation on those women was that it was okay for them not to have to work later because they had to go home and take care of their family, even if their family was just a spouse. And the expectation on the single woman was completely different, because you don't have the commitment to have to take care of [any one else].

3.4.4 *Motherhood Seen As Incompatible with Top Professional Leadership*

Focus group participants who were mothers, or were contemplating becoming parents at some point in the future, expressed the belief that to balance a career in the Jewish community and a family, they would have to compromise their ambitions to hold top positions of communal leadership.

I'm not sure that it's possible for us to have real power in the Jewish community, or in the world, if women still choose to be primary caretakers. That's depressing to me. That's really sad.

Many women took for granted that the choice to be a parent would be a barrier to their achieving the highest levels of professional leadership, though they did not see gender in of itself as the barrier.

I don't think I see a barrier in terms of what I could be within the community, or leadership roles, but I see it when I think about turning thirty and I do want to have children at some point. Even though I have a very equal relationship with my husband, I know that the world will probably make it easier for me to go part-time... Since I work... in the Jewish world, how will that affect my advancement?

A lot of times women start off on careers and then, if they take time off to have families, they lose anywhere between six months and... five years of community work and continuing education and professional development--all of those things that keep us moving up the ladder. Then you have to start over again. That's a reality for us as women, especially in this field.

These young women expressed acceptance of what they perceived to be “reality” - they would not be able to reach certain positions of leadership if they chose to be mothers, at least not without struggle. Some indicated they did not aspire to reach the top, preferring what they perceived as a more balanced life. They openly rejected the lifestyles they associated with women who believe that they can “do it all.”

The women who are full-time, who are moms, are just driven to the point where that's their all, that's what they see. They want that position and they're going to go for it and they're going to be back at work six weeks after they have their child. That's just not me. I don't necessarily think it should be the expectation of any woman, or man, for that matter, too, to have to make such a sacrifice in your family's life in order to feel you are going to be able to make that step, if you want to be the executive director, or whatever it is.

As much as I would love to be able to get my master's, and I would love to be able to continue with my education and be able to get a better job, I know it's not realistic [to think I can and still be a mother].

I can foresee that my activism and my career are going to have to go on the back burner while I focus on more family-related stuff. That's weird. I didn't think I would have to make that sort of choice, but it does feel kind of inevitable.

While some of these young women have redefined success for themselves and therefore are genuinely not interested in achieving top professional posts, others spoke about aiming at positions they feel will be attainable.

I don't see too many hurdles when it comes to being a woman in the professional realm, mostly because I don't see myself reaching for the top position in an organization.

Such attitudes seem to confirm Ellen Deutsch Quint's earlier findings in a study on barriers to women professionals in Federations. As Deutsch Quint concluded, “Perception impacts on

expectations and expectations impact on career goals. If women don't expect they can achieve a particular position, they set their career paths differently.”⁶⁴

3.4.5 *Suggestions for Easing the Work/Life Struggle*

Many focus group participants initially framed work/life balance issues as personal challenges rather than institutional issues. However, when asked if there were institutional supports that could improve their situations, many identified concrete suggestions for change. They pointed to progressive policies that have been shown to work in the corporate and non-profit arenas and suggested that Jewish organizations should adopt such policies and actively challenge the perceived “reality” of the incompatibility of achieving healthy life and family and a successful Jewish communal career.

3.4.5.1 *Need for Flex-Time*

Focus group participants who work as Jewish communal professionals believe their organizations should be more flexible in structuring employment, particularly given the fact that many work nights and weekends. Mothers also suggested that Jewish organizations should take into account that non-traditional work hours often necessitate additional childcare costs.

Flex-time is definitely very important, because even if you want to be there, you want to work those evenings and do those “phonings,” you’re still getting paid the same salary, and you have to pay for childcare. To do phoning and raise money for the community, I’m spending forty dollars to have someone watch my kid for those four hours.... I think it has to be a give-and-take for the organization and the worker. If they need you to be there for staff events at night, or whatever, which is a big thing in the Jewish community, then you need to be able to come in at 10:30 in the morning. It shouldn’t be nine-to-five-plus

Mid-career professionals believed flex-time could increase efficiency in their workplace, saying getting the job done is more important than doing it within traditional work hours.

I think that if you have something that needs to get done, and if you’re on a computer at home at night, and it’s 11:30 and your house is quiet and you can get it done, great! And if you need to be somewhere at eleven o’clock in the morning, at your kid’s school for a play, fine. I think what’s more important is that people in positions of power can understand that there is a balance in life, and a happy employee is a much more productive one. That’s the bottom line.

The environment in which you’re working needs to understand that you can still get the job done, and do it extraordinarily well, even though there may be a period of time when you have to be away from work because of your family.

⁶⁴ Isserman and Hostein (1994).

3.4.5.2 Part-Time Work

Some focus group professionals who work part-time raised questions about the way their organizations view part-time work. They indicated most part-time workers in the Jewish community are women. Working part-time often places one on a track that does not lead to career advancement. Some expressed the belief they were doing the equivalent of a full-time job in fewer in-office hours and therefore questioned the lesser status of part-time work. They suggested part-time work need not be automatically considered a lower status option.

I have a job where I work four days a week. I think I have a very good job, and I am very well treated there in all ways. My job is calculated on working four days a week, but there is no difference from the work I would do if I were there five days a week. I just get it done in four days a week, because I'm a professional.

I also challenge this whole notion of the percentage time plan and its equity and its fairness. I'm sure that people who work three and four days a week and take less pay for it are really holding full professional positions. I work for a professional organization. I know how many men are working part-time and how many women are working part-time, how many men cobble together a career and how many women cobble together a career. It is a totally gendered work style.

While many professionals were interested in exploring alternative career trajectories and new definitions of full-time work, others held to a more traditional view of the career path to the top of Jewish professional life.

Long hours come with the territory: Unfortunately, for this culture, people who get to high-level jobs work all the time. They work long hours. If you want to work a more modified schedule, you have to be willing to be somewhere else in the power authority.

Anybody who wants it [a top professional post], male or female, has to sacrifice a great deal personally to achieve that kind of success, to be in that position... So what you're saying is: Do the people want to sacrifice? It's not just women, it's also men. There are men who opt out of that life also, because they don't want to make the sacrifices to be in that position.

3.4.5.3 Need for More Fluidity Between Professional and Volunteer Leadership

Some focus group participants who had worked as professionals before taking time off to be full-time mothers suggested that this group is an under-tapped resource for skilled volunteers. They further indicated that their contributions as volunteers could be considered a way of staying on track for professional advancement if organizations were willing to think more creatively about alternative career paths.

There are so many people like myself out there who worked in the Jewish community, had a kid or a few kids, and took off maybe ten years. You want to keep involved somehow professionally in the Jewish community and then eventually go back. There are not that many options. There has to be some advocacy to inform Jewish

organizations about how to utilize us in part-time positions, flex-time, working from home. . . . Just more of an awareness of how they can use all of us out there, because there are a lot of us.

3.4.6 Gender, Parenting and Work/Life Balance

While focus group participants spoke of the particular challenges facing mothers in the Jewish workplace, many saw the issue of work/life balance as one that affects both women and men. They expressed a belief that these issues should be addressed in ways that reach out to all Jewish communal workers, regardless of gender.

If you're addressing this issue with women, you also need to address it with men. There needs to be a balance in terms of what the expectations are of men and women, at work and at home.

I think maybe that's the next frontier, where... men and women have equal [job flexibility] and the mommy track and daddy track isn't [sic] viewed as something below, rather than just as good as.

Nonetheless, focus group participants described a current workplace reality in which gender highly influences both perception and experience. Mothers who work full-time can be viewed with suspicion while fathers who work full-time are often assumed to be doing what is necessary to provide for their families.

When the woman decides... to put her career... on a front burner, so she can say, "Okay, I'm going to try to do both [work and family] at the same time, but my work is very important to me" –she's seen as somebody who doesn't care about her family and somebody whose children, in other people's eyes, maybe don't get the best care, or the most attention.

But if my husband wanted to work four days a week, people would really look askance at that: You have a family. How can you work four days a week?

Focus group participants also reported they felt they needed to be more careful than their male counterparts about maintaining strict boundaries between home and work life, even when there was a personal cost.

My immediate supervisor is a guy. He brought his one-year-old daughter into work last weekend... I feel like, in a way, he gains points for bringing in his baby. But then I might think twice about bringing a baby in, because I don't want to be mommy-tracked in people's minds, even though it's just the same good parenting. . . it would change people's perception of me instead of him.

I often feel like a closeted mother. Everyone knows I'm a mother, but I so downplay it professionally... I've assessed that it's too great a cost professionally to somehow fully integrate it. . . . That's a huge personal cost.

3.4.7 Institutional Policy and the Division of Labor at Home

While focus group discussions of work/life balance centered on issues in the workplace, some participants also discussed the need for change in the cultural expectations of women at home and in families.

There is still the same expectation of women in the home, regardless of their position in the workplace.

Some mothers suggested communal policies might eventually help change the division of labor in their homes. They expressed the hope the Jewish community could encourage men to assume more responsibilities traditionally delegated to women, thereby offering more options to women and men and also raising the status of traditional female roles.

I hope that eventually more employers will come to see the bigger picture of the benefits of things like flex-time, of parental leave as opposed to just maternity leave. It's one thing to have certain laws in place; it's another thing for companies and employers to really embrace it and encourage it... If employers are more accommodating, that will then help households and individual families to maybe change over time. If that can happen, I think that will help us on the time constraints that women have now...

By encouraging men to do the traditionally women's roles, it wouldn't be seen as such a foreign thing later on down the road for there to be a stay-at-home dad... It would raise the honor of being the family person.

Focus group participants suggested such changes could be encouraged not just by employers but by those who influence Jewish culture. They specifically mentioned the potential impact of rabbis, Jewish educators, and Jewish newspapers encouraging the community to promote fathers' participation in every aspect of childrearing as normative and desirable. They spoke of wanting Jewish children's stories to include positive images of men and fathers engaging in activities usually seen as part of the women's preserve within Judaism.

As important as the traditional women's role is in the family, it would be wonderful to see men preparing Shabbat. It would be wonderful to see some of those more homebound or family-bound activities promoted, supported, endorsed, and encouraged for men – like men's cooking classes. Something that you would see mostly for women, teach the men to do it, because most of the time it's because they don't know how. So it's, "Oh, she'll take care of it." So empower the men to do the things that we've been doing because, over the past forty to fifty years, we've been empowered to do things that traditionally men have done.

3.4.8 Jewish Community Is Still Perceived as a Good Place to Work

A large majority (78%) of the Jewish communal professionals surveyed rated their overall experience working in the Jewish community as very satisfying or extremely satisfying.⁶⁵ Despite the difficulty of balancing work/life issues, and despite other obstacles to women's advancement, many younger focus group participants nonetheless expressed the belief that the Jewish community is a good place to work.

Jewish women professionals highlighted the presence of other women throughout the ranks of an organization as an important factor in job satisfaction.

The majority of our staff is female. On the whole, I think there was an unwritten understanding that things were smoothest when the male leadership stayed at arm's length. We had a [female] COO come in, probably a third of the time I had been there, and there was certainly, and is still, the pervasive attitude that she runs one of the best ships we've ever seen. I think the atmosphere changed immensely when she came and we were much more productive. The staff meetings, which stopped being attended by the top male leadership, became much more fruitful. It's a woman-driven organization, which is one of the things that was most appealing to me about working there.

Several young employees of Federations and JCC's also specifically indicated that they chose to work in the Jewish community because they believed it would be a good place to be as mothers.

Some older participants who had raised children while working for Jewish agencies agreed.

It was a family-friendly environment. It was a place where, when my children were young, they could come with me and there was a place for them. They grew up in a JCC and I think the children of the other women I worked with grew up there too. But even for the men that I worked with, it was a place where their families were. It was really a family-friendly place always.

I worked in several day schools, in religious schools and in supplementary schools. I think it's very family-supportive.

These women seemed less concerned about whether they would be or had been held back from advancing to top professional leadership and more concerned about finding ways to blend work with family. This finding is consistent with findings from other studies that younger women and women in lower and mid-level positions experience their Jewish communal workplaces as more supportive to women. This is in contrast to older women in top positions, who find themselves face-to-face with the glass ceiling.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ According to a lawyer who works on workplace discrimination, it is not uncommon for workers to express a high degree of satisfaction despite poor conditions (Kathleen Peratis, Ma'yan Consultation, March 24, 2004).

⁶⁶ Isserman and Hostein (1994).

One of the reasons why both myself and my fiancé were so excited about taking a job within the [Jewish community] was because of the benefits—however miniscule or whatever they might be for the actual need, the benefits they give for the percentage off on child care. I know that if I decide to come back to work when my child is old enough... they can be downstairs and I can go visit. Or they can be... close enough to home where I can say to myself, “Okay, I know the person that's taking care of my child. I'm aware of the kind of programming they're doing because it's my association that's doing this kind of programming. I'm getting a percentage off for it so that I will continue to work... That's one of the reasons, when I was talking to certain people in the community about it, [they said] ‘You should definitely take this job, because this is going to be one of the best places to work when it comes to you having children’”.

3.4.9 *Desire for Action and Institutional Support on Work/Life Issues*

Professionals are looking for more institutional support around work/life issues. The introduction of flexibility initiatives, job-sharing, child-care options and better personnel policies and benefits would greatly enhance the working environment in the Jewish community. Other services that would greatly benefit employees include tuition assistance for Jewish day schools and the possibility of inter-organizational alliances to provide summer camps, mental health counseling, elder care, etc.⁶⁷ If such initiatives were to be undertaken they should be well publicized and formally documented. Managers and supervisors should be trained in how to effectively monitor such practices and best practices should be shared.

How nice it would be to have some kind of Jewish feminist organ lead the whole issue of working alternatives, to really push the boundaries of alternative working set-ups. I think that would be incredibly supportive.

Something that maybe Ma'yan could do in the short term: promoting and spotlighting different models of leadership. I think that's a piece of it—like job-share models.

AWP's pilot projects with JBFCS and Hillel are examples of the possibilities for organizations that are interested in improving their policies on work/life issues. AWP worked with the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, Inc. in New York City to develop a Workplace Flexibility Initiative which clearly outlines formal flexible work arrangements and procedures.⁶⁸ AWP's work with Hillel yielded three possible intervention strategies: a proactive program to showcase women as organizational leaders; a professional development initiative aimed at high-potential women professionals; and the development of a task force on work/life balance for Hillel professionals.⁶⁹

The Task Force on Balancing Personal and Professional Lives generated recommendations which included: creating an environment that encourages discussion of work/life balance issues; developing a more thorough professional development process; involving lay leaders; developing

⁶⁷ Sulam (2004), p. 50.

⁶⁸ Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services Inc. (2004). *A Guide to Workplace Flexibility at JBFCS*. New York.

⁶⁹ Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community (2002). “Report of the Hillel Task Force on Balancing Professional and Personal Lives.” New York.

formal personnel policies that promote balance and flexibility; linking the promotion of programmatic excellence with the promotion of work/life balance.⁷⁰

3.5 Findings on Lay Leadership

Almost one half (48%) of Ma'yan focus group participants identified themselves as volunteers in the Jewish community. A third (33.4%) of participants were board members of Jewish organizations and 22% held officer or executive positions on those boards.

The areas in which these women volunteered included local synagogues, Jewish women's organizations, Federations and national Jewish organizations. Our findings demonstrate Jewish women volunteers are a diverse lot with a wide range of experiences and assessments of what practices prevent women from achieving more success in the lay arena. Their voices suggest multiple strategies for improving the experiences of Jewish women volunteers and ensuring Jewish organizations will utilize and honor the talents and energy of all their volunteers.

3.5.1 Continued Sexism on Lay Boards

A significant percentage of volunteers (29%), though less than professionals (48%), reported having experienced gender discrimination in the course of their work in the Jewish community. Sometimes lay leaders confront obstacles to attaining the highest levels of lay leadership on both local and national levels. Sometimes they encounter a lack of flexibility, creativity or willingness to restructure lay leadership positions to better accommodate the realities of women's (and men's) increasingly complex lives.

If we have a competent, top-notch woman who should be doing a job and can't do all of it, why can't these jobs be split? Why can't we recreate the structures of the top of organizations and say, "We have a president for internal stuff, for running the programming; and we have a vice president of external affairs, and that's the person who does the fundraising. Maybe that person is called the chair of the board of trustees.

Others spoke about the "male culture" of decision-making, experiences of being pigeon-holed into behind-the-scenes planning roles, repeated experiences of finding themselves unheard and/or unacknowledged as the source of their own ideas, and the isolation of coming up against an "old boys' club" and outdated gender stereotypes. While some of these issues have been discussed in the context of gender bias faced by professionals, they are worth briefly restating as they can appear different in the volunteer realm.

The issue of gender balance on the boards of Jewish organizations was not a new one for the majority of focus group participants.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

- 67% of survey respondents indicated that they pay attention to the gender balance of the leadership of the organizations to which they belong.

3.5.1.1 *Women's Voices Not Heard*

Many women volunteers continue to experience Jewish communal organizations as environments in which women's voices are not heard or taken seriously.

Board meetings... The men will not shut up. The women don't get to talk. On boards where the administrative and philosophical directions of an organization are being decided... there is a huge difference between the way men and women speak, and the importance with which what they say is weighed.

Many focus group participants described the experience of speaking at a meeting and being ignored, only to have a man restate their idea and be greeted with praise and agreement, without any acknowledgement that the idea was previously expressed by a woman (a much documented occurrence in the secular world as well).⁷¹ A well-respected professor of Jewish Studies described her method for ensuring she is heard on the board of a male-dominated Jewish professional association:

When I want ideas to get across, I write them down and hand them to the man sitting next to me, saying "Suggest that," because otherwise it's not going to be heard. That goes on constantly.

3.5.1.2 *Old Boys' Club*

Even women who have made it to positions of leadership find the power of the "old boys' network" persists. One woman who sat on the executive committee of the Federation in her city for many years felt that during meetings she was "very much part of the discussion and the decision-making." But as soon as a meeting ended, "all the guys hang out together. It's clubby, good old boy. . . [and you quickly] feel like you don't belong." Another woman, who for a time served as president of her Federation and thought she had made it into the "old boys' club" was later labeled a "troublemaker" because of her attempts to advocate on behalf of other women and was forced out of her position before she completed her term.

3.5.1.3 *Female Implementers, Male Decision-Makers*

Some focus group participants described a double standard in Jewish volunteer life in which they are expected to "do the work" while the men do more of the talking and decision-making and ultimately receive more of the credit. This double standard of Jewish communal involvement has led some women to demand more public recognition for the roles they are actually playing; and it has led others to leave organizations.

⁷¹ Valian (1999).

You get that attitude that you're more of a helper and you're being instructed as to what to do in ... performing your duties.

I realized that the men make all the decisions and I do the work. Everyone is happy to have me as their co-chair, because everything gets done, and the men get up and say, "This is what we're doing." I don't want public attention, so I don't get up and say, "This is what we're doing." ...I opened my mouth at a meeting once and everyone started talking over me – mostly men. I just got quiet and said, Okay, what's this? I realized that they don't want me to say anything; they want me to do things. . . This is not what I want to do. So I'm not going to do it.

Years ago, I used to be co-chairman with my husband on various committees. I finally told him I didn't want to be co-chairman with him any more, because I wound up doing all the work anyway, so I might as well be chairman.

3.5.1.4 *Some Volunteers Opt Out When Faced with Gender Bias*

Focus group participants shared numerous experiences of gender bias that had contributed to their decisions to quit committees or boards with which they had been involved. Volunteers who experience gender bias can more easily decide to opt out of involvement than their professional counterparts. They value their time and are not willing to feel it is being wasted. Moreover, they usually have less to lose in leaving. The reasons they leave are not always communicated to those in leadership so their experiences of gender bias are often not documented or understood by the organization.

This is, in many ways, an incredibly amazing congregation and an incredibly inclusive congregation... But even in this congregation... there is a sense of male entitlement... [and] there isn't enough intervention in terms of that male entitlement, either by other members of the group or, most importantly, the people who are leading the group... I've seen that male entitlement in various committees at this synagogue. I was on an adult education committee. There would be a committee meeting and there would be consensus reached. Then, suddenly, things had changed because some men decided that it would be better if we did it this way. That has certainly limited my involvement.

In another example, a mother shared an experience of hiring a babysitter to watch over her children so she could attend a nominating committee meeting. When she later watched all her input overturned by one man who arrived late, she concluded it was not worthwhile to continue to sacrifice time with her children and money for childcare only to feel that her presence carried no weight. She quit the committee.

The frustration of gender inequity, combined with the other pressures of women's busy lives, has also led women to decide to put their volunteer energies elsewhere. A member of a Reform synagogue indicated her frustration trying to invite women speakers for a scholar-in-residence program contributed to her decision to stop volunteering on the adult education committee.

I was on—no longer, because I couldn't deal with it any more—the original adult education committee and was part of the original planning of scholars-in-residence. The only year they had a female scholar- in-residence was the year that I battled for it...They haven't had a woman since... Maybe it would be different if I kept battling it every year, but my career called me in other directions and I just put my energies somewhere else.

However, many women shared stories of positive volunteer experiences and some specifically felt they had found places where their voices were heard and taken seriously. Some described good interactions between men and women on boards and suggested both are learning from each other.

My involvement in Federation and other organizations and boards has taught me that I can now learn from men the good things-the way they do things well in organizational life that I think we women should learn from... I'm enjoying my interaction with men around communal things because we get to engage around a specific topic, an issue, agenda, a substantive thing, as opposed to where they get wrapped and I get wrapped up in other identities.

3.5.2 Board Culture Lacks “Women’s” Values

Some focus group participants indicated they feel alienated from Jewish communal life because of Jewish boards and organizations that do not value the contributions made by women. They believe the culture of the boards of these organizations must change if they are going to continue to attract smart and effective women volunteers. Many acknowledged there has been progress on boards in terms of women’s presence, particularly on local synagogue boards, yet they made clear that even when numbers increase, the culture of the institution and its hierarchical structure do not necessarily change. This can perpetuate feelings of alienation and disinterest.

Maybe there's an equal number of men and women on the boards and on the committees. I don't know, but there's certainly a great representation of women. But we don't run things by women's voice; we run things at that synagogue, the way you expressed it, with male process... We need a more feminine voice. And it needs to be diversified and inculcated into the process in the way we get things done. For me, that's the challenge. How does that happen? I just resigned yesterday from a position because I'm tired of the way things are done.

Federation is... not a feminist environment. There are not feminist processes. I don't feel people are warmly welcomed and asked to engage in the process.

Some focus group participants suggested increasing women’s presence on boards does not necessarily lead towards a shift in culture, particularly if men continue to occupy the top positions of power. A woman from a synagogue with many women in leadership positions on the board said that because the synagogue’s rabbis were both male, there was always a sense men were “running the place.”

Many focus group participants used gendered language to describe the problems of lay leadership and the kinds of changes they want to see.

The truth is that our institutions are totally unaffected by any kind of feminine consciousness – I don't care how many women are in them.

All the lay leadership is in a very male pattern – a pattern of bullying, of closed-door meetings. That is very male-dominated. Even when there are women chairs of the board, they operate that way. It's horrifying. I'm not on boards anymore, because I just couldn't stand that.

Even though these focus group participants used gendered language to discuss the problems they perceive in the culture of their organizations, others made clear they feel men can be disenfranchised or turned off by such issues as well.

I think there are a lot of men who are not interested in getting involved in the Federation system either, because that sort of power and control thing doesn't work for them either.

3.5.3 *Conflicting Views on Money, Gender and Power; “Pay to Play” Is An Obstacle for Many Women*

Many participants identified the current structure of Jewish communal leadership, in which financial resources are a definitive factor for achieving leadership, as an obstacle to women's involvement. Even though some women can leverage their wealth to attain power, the continued reign of the “pay to play” principle prevents a diversity of women from rising to leadership positions.

Those people who can't afford... to be in leadership positions, even though they are terrific. I think that is a big issue and I think it's going to be an even bigger issue with the next generation. It concerns me greatly.

Many participants feel disenfranchised from some level of Jewish communal leadership, most often Federations, because, in the words of one participant, “If you don't have money, you often don't have a voice.” They resent the link between money and power in the Jewish community and hold negative opinions about Jewish communal operating structures.

Some focus group participants spoke of the ways in which money has been used to prevent organizations from moving forward on women's issues. One example was a congregation that would not consider hiring a female rabbi because an older male donor was assumed to be against the idea. In another case, a large women's conference, organized by women, decided not to invite a certain controversial speaker because they were told they would lose their organizational backing.

The women were sitting at the table; the women were doing the work; the men who controlled the money would not give money to the conference if this certain speaker showed up.

Some participants urged more women to leverage their own money to support a feminist agenda. Others criticized feminists who use their money for such purposes as undemocratic and un-feminist.

Many focus group participants believed the link between money and power in Jewish communal leadership disproportionately affects women; others felt this area was, ironically, one of the more egalitarian aspects of Jewish life, as both men and women without significant financial resources find themselves in a similar position. Many participants see the necessity for profound change in the nature of lay leadership in the Jewish community.

I don't know that it's necessarily a women's issue. It's a women's issue in that there are more men in power than women in power. There's that sub-issue. But, in general, the people who are in power make the decisions and others are excluded. On that level, it's not a men's issue or a women's issue; it's an insider/outsider issue.

It would be a transformation if there was some ethic in the Jewish community that half the board members were people who were not chosen because of wealth or potential wealth.

3.5.3.1 *With the Right Skills Women Can Be Leaders*

There were conflicting voices among focus group participants about the relationship of gender, power, money and lay leadership in the Jewish community. A small but vocal minority of focus group participants, often involved in Federations and other major Jewish organizations, expressed the need for some change in the leadership structures of the Jewish community, but indicated their confidence in the current structure, which continues to raise significant funds for important projects. These focus group participants were largely unapologetic about the role of money in lay leadership.

There's a very clear path in the process. It's all about, "Will you raise money? Will you do the networking?" So the question becomes, do women want to go on that traditional path to get to that level? If you're willing to write your check and do the solicitation, I think you can break into the hierarchy in our Federation.

Many of these focus group participants expressed the belief money is centrally important to the functioning of structures like Federations; they do not wish to challenge the current hierarchy by changing its operating principles. They believe many of the problems of gender bias in lay leadership can be ameliorated when more women learn to use money strategically, grow comfortable fundraising, and position themselves on board finance and development committees. They identify women's lack of financial expertise and women's reluctance to join budget, finance and development committees as barriers to their full participation as top communal leaders.

I think a lot of women—and maybe it's changing in the next generation—[but] even well-educated women don't have financial literacy.

I know so many women you ask them to sit on a budget committee [and they answer:] "I don't know anything about numbers, I can't talk about numbers." This is a core problem everywhere.

Other women see the need for some structural change. They acknowledge the historic obstacles to women's leadership and the persistent biases of male lay leaders. At the same time, they speak as women who have managed to achieve leadership and believe it is possible with the right skills and resources. They urge women to recognize it is not just women who have difficulty understanding budgets.

We would go to budget committee meetings and I would ask a lot of questions. After the meeting one time, I said to somebody—because I was the only woman on the budget committee—"I must be a real idiot that I have to ask these questions all the time." I think it was actually the CFO. He said, "No, the men have the same questions. They just don't want to ask them in public, because they think it will look like something they ought to know."

3.5.3.2 Women Uncomfortable with Traditional Fundraising Methods

One of the primary ways men raise money for their communal organizations is through personal relationships and by asking for support for one another's projects. Prior research has indicated that some women disdain this method of raising money.⁷² Some focus group participants reiterated such sentiments.

I think part of it is that women don't ask as directly as men do... Men always have known that... you're trading favors all the time. This guy who was just honored in Chicago says, "I sent out a million dollars in business this year. Every person that I gave business to was told, 'You're taking a table.'" Now, women do that to some extent, but it feels really ugly. It doesn't feel good. It's not a feminist model of raising money.

Others exhorted women to overcome their negative judgments and discomfort about raising money. They acknowledged it can be more difficult for women to raise money because of the social networking involved, but they stressed the importance of doing it anyway.

Women have to take care of the money if they're going to be a real power. You've got to serve on the finance committee, on the audit committee, and you can't say no. You've got to do the development. I will tell you, the men do big-time development. Women can do it, too, but it's harder, because you're not their pal. It's very hard for me.

3.5.3.3 Discomfort with the Business Model of Many Boards

Related to the issue of money in lay leadership is the increasingly business-like model of many Jewish organizations and synagogue boards. Some focus group participants stated their discomfort with this model and expressed their belief it has contributed to a gap between male and female board members. They disagree with the business-like manner they perceive men to use in approaching decisions on the boards of synagogues and Jewish organizations and with the way this approach closes off the possibility for alternative approaches often advanced by women.

⁷² Ma'yan (1998).

You don't see women as the treasurers of the synagogue who can say, "Okay, show me your 1040 form, honey; let's see what you can afford." Those are still very male-dominated roles. In those roles, men do not have the capacity that a woman has to see beyond the number, to the circumstance.

There were a number of men on the board who had very strong business backgrounds and they tended to make their decisions as businessmen. When some of the women would talk, you would see their eyes glaze over. It was amazing how they would just give the issue the back of their hands, figuratively, but it worked out that way because the women were talking from a different angle... It was a different vocabulary. It was coming at the problems from a different angle. And they didn't know how to evaluate it. Therefore, they ignored it. I learned...you had about thirty seconds when you were speaking with a group of men on a board to make your initial point. If you started off with feelings, or impressions... you were lost.

Others feel the right women for board leadership are those with business backgrounds who would bring the same kinds of qualifications and approaches to board work that men bring. These focus group participants report women who have financial literacy and come from business backgrounds are more likely to be heard and listened to by male members.

Once they have a sense that you understand what they're talking about—the numbers—that's okay. Then maybe they can listen to you, too, but in my experience you had to show them that you also could figure out the numbers...As soon as you can answer them back on their terms, you have a better shot at them listening to you.

3.5.4 Many Women Alienated by Federation

Focus group discussions revealed issues of gender greatly influence women's decisions about where to put their volunteer time and energy.

Some Jewish women no longer place their confidence and trust in large Jewish organizations. Many are particularly critical of and alienated from the Federation system. Though 22% of focus group participants indicated they were involved in some way with Federation, only 17% of respondents agreed with the statement "Large Jewish philanthropic organizations (e.g. Federations) know best about where money is needed in the Jewish community."

I don't give money to the Federation any more. I stopped because of all the exclusiveness I felt from them.

In the Federation world, where decisions really get made with the bulk of the community's resources, even though it is by consensual community process, whose voices are heard when you sit around the table? It's not women's voices, because there are no women around the table.

Still, these experiences were not universal. Some lay leaders remained invested in Federation and spoke about paving the way for other women to follow them.

3.5.5 *The Growth of Smaller, Less Powerful Organizations and Women's Organizations*

A number of focus group participants reported they have decided to avoid involvement in more powerful institutions such as Federations and instead work in smaller organizations or in women's organizations. They explained they enjoy grassroots, local volunteer work in part because they feel more empowered in these areas than in large Jewish organizational structures and also because they can more clearly see the tangible results of their work.

Some of these women questioned the forced choice between being involved in powerful institutions "that have a lot of the power and control over the money" where they believe they would not be heard, or working with small, more progressive organizations with less money and power that were likely to feel more comfortable and supportive.

Sometimes I wonder, as we leave behind all the power and money. . . whether we are actually ceding [too much].

While some expressed confidence that they are happier than they would be if they were "still trying to get into those doors" because they are "tired of fighting the patriarchy," they also expressed concern about the marginalization their choices entail. Other focus group participants spoke about choosing to work in women's organizations instead of on mixed boards because "women who work together... are more cooperative and can really get things done." While many reported positive experiences working with women's organizations some indicated their disappointment with them.

I think Jewish organizations in general can be very elitist. I looked to Jewish women's organizations to defy that, and many of them haven't. There's a way in which as, a thirtysomething-Jewish-social justice-tikkun olam [activist], looking to Judaism and feminism as a place to heal my world, I haven't felt welcome.

Many younger women also expressed the sense that the era of women's auxiliaries and synagogue sisterhoods was coming to an end. Yet others shared positive experiences of finding women's community in such settings.

3.5.6 *Fear of Feminization*

There is some fear among Jewish women volunteers that boards which attract a lot of women are losing male lay leaders.

I have found, on the synagogue boards and the JCC boards that I've been on, more and more women. Actually, it's become almost endemic. Once the women start to take over, the men drop out.

This issue was not raised very often but seemed to be an important one to watch, as the trend of the feminization and concurrent devaluation of certain professions and spheres of influence has been well documented in other areas. The long-term impact of synagogue leadership and social service agencies becoming "feminized" and undervalued by men could have significant implications for

Jewish life. On the other hand, such fears might also be blown out of proportion and used to create a backlash against making more change and achieving parity in communal leadership. This issue should be tested against real numbers and a wider range of experience. One recent study of Conservative synagogues found that men continue to be more engaged than women in liturgical and congregational leadership, so at least in some arenas, concerns about women “taking over” remain out of step with the reality on the ground.⁷³

3.6 Conclusion

Women professionals, lay leaders, rabbis and scholars all spoke eloquently about their experiences in the Jewish community and they revealed a picture of a community in transition, a community which has begun to incorporate women into the ranks of its leaders and members but has not yet fully recognized its need to transform itself to maximize women’s contributions. While focus group participants continue to value their involvement in the Jewish community as professionals and volunteers, they also readily acknowledge the gender bias they continue to face. Some have decided to opt out of involvement. This is not the decision most focus group participants want to make. They want to find meaningful ways to improve their communities and the experiences of women in them.

- 51% of focus group participants are interested in training to become more effective advocates for Jewish women.

Some focus group participants shared sweeping visions of other next steps for improving the Jewish community for Jewish women and Jewish families through evaluative mechanisms and partnerships with Jewish institutions.

What I would like to see is a group of people and an organized mechanism to look at every slice of Jewish life—in terms of the kind of services that it provides – at the established organized Federation structure, the human services structure, education, culture, Israel. In every one of those slices, I would like to look at programmatic issues. In terms of cultural life, I'd like to see some way of looking at every organization that provides cultural programs and make sure that its program includes sufficient representation of issues that (a) speak to women, and (b) address gender issues. The same thing across every single slice. Then making some connections between them. Then internally in terms of how the organization is structured... It's grandiose, but it can be done.

I would like to see... a kind of feminist SWAT team that goes to every Jewish institution and does some kind of in-service evaluation and training at all different levels—internal structure and programmatic. That is a free service that the Jewish community underwrites—just like we have the auditors come once a year and turn our offices upside down, we'd have the feminist auditors, but we'll have a more user-friendly term... it would be more of a constructive thing,

⁷³ Halbertal, Tova and Cohen, Steven M. (2001). “Gender Variations in Jewish Identity; Practices and Attitudes in Conservative Congregations,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 22, 37-64.

a consultation. We'd go to every institution and say, "We can offer you a look at what you already do, a look at what the issues are that you're missing."

As these voices illustrate, focus group participants envision a future Jewish community more responsive to women's needs, whose leadership and programming would reflect the diversity of Jewish women and their families. Most focus group participants believed that the Jewish community can and will decide to live up to its ideals and become a model of equity, justice and meaningful involvement for all its members and leaders. The fact that a full half of focus group participants indicated an interest in being involved in advocating for Jewish women and 80% of women who work in the Jewish community indicated they would use a Ma'yan report card is further indication an activist base around gender issues exists and is ready to be mobilized.

4. THE DIVERSITY OF JEWISH WOMEN: Inclusion And Exclusion Based On Class, Age, Ethnicity/Race, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Inter-marriage

- Focus group participants criticized the Jewish community for failing to accommodate poor women, single women, older women, LGBTQ women, intermarried women, and Jewish women of color.⁷⁴
- Without active strategies for inclusion, Jewish institutions will lose the participation of these vibrant sectors of the Jewish community.

4.1 Introduction

Recent feminist literature has demonstrated that the experiences of women cannot be fully understood by looking solely through a gendered lens. Women's complex identities and experiences are better understood when examined through multiple analyses of gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, religion, and other significant factors. The Ma'yan study found Jewish women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion in and from the Jewish community cluster around these multiple aspects of identity. Any organization concerned with women in the Jewish community must understand the multiple identities of Jewish women and how particular configurations of identity and social position influence women's experiences and opportunities. This demands thinking in a more integrated way about the relationship between gender bias and other kinds of bias in the Jewish community. It also means working harder to embrace the diversity within Jewish women's and Jewish feminist organizations.

4.2 Widespread Support For More Inclusive Policies

Focus group participants believe the Jewish community is not doing enough to embrace the diversity of Jewish women and their families.

- 93% said they would advocate for more inclusive definitions of family in their synagogue or communal organizational membership policies (single parents, same-sex couples, etc).
- 93% of survey respondents believe the Jewish community must be more inclusive of same-sex couples.
- 86% of survey respondents believe the Jewish community must be more inclusive of interfaith couples.
- 76% of survey respondents believe that the Jewish community is not sufficiently inclusive of single parents.

Many focus group participants expressed concern about the lack of inclusiveness of their Jewish communities.

⁷⁴ Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer.

How can we say we're a progressive community? [Our Jewish day school] didn't allow a ... movie to be shown, because of this fear of the outside world. It was called "That's a Family."... One segment was gay and lesbian families. Another was a single parent. The school was up in arms.

Still, in every progressive Hebrew School and day school, you have Abba making Kiddush and Ima lighting the candles. . . Why are we perpetuating that? There are so few educational materials that show families that aren't a mother and a father and children.

While the above statistics were gathered from responses to the survey, participants raised many other areas of exclusion, not included in the survey, including class, age and stage of life, ethnicity/race, marriage/partnership with non-Jews, and gender identity.

4.3 Class Barriers and the High Cost of Jewish Life

4.3.1 Background

Connectedness to organized Jewish life has been found to be directly related to income.⁷⁵ Jews with less access to money are less likely to be affiliated with Jewish institutions. Of all Jews, women are most likely to be shut out of organized Jewish life because of lack of finances. When women's lives are most complex and precarious, their financial situation is weakest.⁷⁶ Many studies have found that divorce much more drastically depresses women's income than men's.⁷⁷

Issues of money and class play a role in affiliation, and not only because it costs a lot to affiliate, but also because some focus group participants resent the role money plays in certain institutions. One study found that single Jewish women are particularly offended by the impact of big money on Jewish organizational life and thinking.⁷⁸

Although Ma'yan evaluated findings on class and economic barriers to participation in the Jewish community, our study under-sampled low-income women. Deliberate action must be taken to study the experiences and attitudes of lower income Jewish women. Given that individuals who participated in this study were highly involved in Jewish life and affiliated with Jewish institutions,

⁷⁵ Geffen, Rela Mintz and Pinkenson-Feldman, Ruth (1999). "The Complexity of Women's Lives; The Case of American Jewish Women," in *Yakar Le'Mordecai: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rabbi Mordechai Waxman: Essays on Jewish Thought, American Judaism, and Jewish-Christian Relations*, Zvia Ginor, ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House), 343-348.

⁷⁶ Geffen, Rela Mintz and Pinkenson-Feldman, Ruth (1992). "The Cost of Living Jewishly in Philadelphia," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 67.

⁷⁷ Davidman, Lynn and Tenenbaum, Shelly (1994). "Feminist Sociology and American Jews." In *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

⁷⁸ Fishman, Sylvia Barack (1995). "In Many Voices: Diversity and Commonality Among American Jewish Women," in *Voices for Change: Future Directions for American Jewish Women*, National Commission on American Jewish Women (Waltham, MA: Hadassah: The Zionist Women's Organization of America, Inc. and Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Institute for Community and Religion, Brandeis University).

the study reinforces the conclusion that lower income women's participation often needs to be deliberately sought out.

4.3.2 *Ma'yan Findings on Class Barriers*

- 28% of participants aged 25-40, indicated that the high cost of Jewish affiliation is a significant barrier to their involvement in Jewish communal life.

For many focus group participants in this age bracket, the expenses of Jewish life coincide with the time in their lives when they are raising young children or otherwise setting up their families.

Now that I'm married and have a child, I feel excluded to a certain extent in the Jewish community because I'm not wealthy. The economics of trying to be Jewish and be part of a family have overnight become overwhelming, outrageous.

Some mothers who participated in the focus groups were clear about their priorities for Jewish communal change. As one succinctly put it, "...Speaking as a mother: [my priorities are] affordable day care, affordable day schools."

Other participants of all ages and stages of life also spoke of the ways in which they have felt excluded or uncomfortable due to the financial assumptions of Jewish communal institutions and the high cost of many memberships and programs.

There are so many things that happen in this [synagogue] community and in the [Jewish] community at large that are exclusive because of the monetary commitment. One of the main ways I felt a lot of exclusivity is by our financial status. I find that horrid. It's just completely deplorable. Not only did I have a hard time with it as an adult in that congregation; I had a hard time as a child.

Among focus group participants, affiliation with a synagogue and volunteerism in the Jewish community corresponded to an increase in income. Yet a high percentage of focus group participants in all income brackets were involved in synagogues and as volunteers.

Income	Involved in Synagogue	Volunteer in J.Com
<25,000	59%	48%
25K-50K	65%	44%
50K-100K	80%	42%
100K-150K	93%	38%
150K-200K	83%	63%
200K-350K	81%	65%
350K+	89%	60%

Insensitivity to the high cost of Jewish life and its impact on individuals is a source of significant pain and shame for some focus group participants. These feelings and experiences can deeply affect women's relationships with the organized Jewish community.

They turned me away because I couldn't afford the tickets. I still feel such shame about it. It was very intense for me.

When individuals are turned away from High Holiday services because they cannot afford a ticket, when a couple is asked to change their wedding date because a synagogue donor wants the space for a party, when celebrations of *bar* and *bat mitzvah* become displays of materialism, individuals – disproportionately female – feel marginalized and alienated from their Jewish communities.

I am remembering my own bat mitzvah and having photocopied invitations and how horrible that felt, that mine weren't embossed and printed in the same way that the other kids' were... I didn't want to invite anybody because I was so humiliated that anybody would even see that we couldn't do this display of money... I would love to see a publication made available to parents... to get some information about how to be thoughtful about class....

Such materials are not yet available in most communities. While solutions like “sliding scales” are commonplace in the secular feminist community, they are rarely offered for Jewish community events, regardless of whether they are hosted by women's organizations or even feminist organizations. Even where such solutions are available they are not widely publicized and thus not always utilized.

I think that, as our dues have gone up and up and up, there are people who self-select out. They just don't come. They don't bother applying.

Just about every time that I see invitations to some kind of Jewish event, the cost of the ticket is phenomenal. There's this expectation that everyone is affluent and can afford this. It's so rare that I see something on an invitation to a Jewish event that says either sliding scale, or no one turned away for lack of funds. I see that in other folks' organizations, but it doesn't seem to be part of our consciousness in the Jewish world that some of us need that consideration.... I even wrote...a letter once about that and never got a response. So that really bothers me.

One participant spoke with great pain about her synagogue's lack of understanding of and insensitivity to the effects of divorce on her ability to maintain her membership. Another shared her ongoing pain at the way her mother is treated in a congregation which she has belonged to for many years.

My mom, who's been poor her whole life... is one of the most faithful congregants of that synagogue. She is constantly badgered because she doesn't have enough money to pay the regular dues. They know that. She's been there for thirty years. But every year, they come badger her. I can't tolerate that.

I feel there is so much expectation... in general in the Jewish world – of being at least middle class, if not upper-middle class or upper class. It comes out in the cost of kosher food and the cost of Jewish education and the cost of temple membership and the cost of basically any activity... . There's so much power and access that gets ascribed to money and moneyed people. Usually they're men, but not only.

Not all focus group participants shared the same approach to the issue of offering sliding scales and scholarships. Some defended the high cost of Jewish programming and focused on cases of individuals they believed had taken advantage of well-meaning community organizations.

[Jewish institutions] don't operate on love and hugs and kisses. They must operate on money and it is shameful how many Jews take advantage of Jewish organizations by receiving the services and participating and showing up and getting their kids bar mitzvah [sic] and then disappearing and not paying the fee, or not paying dues. We have examples of people who have asked for reduced dues, and it will go as low as eighteen dollars a year, and they skip out and don't pay that.

If the Jewish community continues to ignore issues of class and the high cost of Jewish affiliation, it will lose the involvement of too many committed and talented individuals and families. As one woman put it:

[We] really imbibe the sense of "to be Jewish is to do good, to make the world a better place." And to not really be able to afford to live that, and be a part of the Jewish community, and live somewhere where you can walk to a synagogue, and send your children to day school, is really just a tragedy for our community.

Another participant stressed that when Jewish organizations talk about *tikkun olam* and ending poverty and economic inequalities, they should not overlook the needs of working class and poor Jews.

I always see... Jewish organizations... doing tikkun olam projects that are going out into what is considered to be impoverished communities... I think that's fantastic, but sometimes people forget that within the Jewish community there are also still folks who are living in poverty and that not all of us have achieved high levels of affluence and high levels of education. There's a lot of Jews that are still struggling in really hard places, too. So, yes, it's great to help other folks, but keep in mind that there are some of us in those tight places, too.

4.4 Single Women

4.4.1 Background

Single women are a significant percentage of the American Jewish population. The NJPS 2000-01 found that 43% of Jewish adults are single; 25% have never been married; 9% are divorced; 8% are widowed; and 1% are separated. When the single population is broken down by age and gender, 82% of Jewish women between the ages 18-24 are single; 46% of Jewish women between the ages

of 25-34 are single and 15% of ages 35-44 are single and have never been married.⁷⁹ Single Jews, both women and men, have also been found to be less likely to affiliate with a Jewish institution, and according to one study are likely to express ambivalence about Jews and Judaism.⁸⁰ Also according to the 1990 NJPS, 27% of employed single women do not expect to have any children. In fact, according to the NJPS 2000-01, 74% of Jewish women age 44 and under have one child or more. Most Jewish mothers work outside the home, though the numbers decrease somewhat with each additional child: 78.1% of women with one child work outside the home; 67.6% with 2 children; 66.5% with 3 children; and 46.8% with four or more children.⁸¹ Data on single parent families from the 1990 NJPS indicated that 9.4% of Jewish families were headed by a single parent. 81% of these single-parent families were headed by women earning at least \$30,000 less than two-parent Jewish families.⁸² Statistics on the number of children being raised by gay and lesbian parents are not yet available, but their numbers are certainly growing.

4.4.2 Findings on Single Women

Jewish communal life is not sufficiently welcoming and inclusive of single mothers and women without partners. Synagogues and other Jewish communal institutions are often structured around traditional family life. Those who do not fit into that paradigm often feel there is no place for them.

When I do go to... Shabbat services, I'm generally the only one, or one of two or three of people who are in their twenties. It just feels like, "Oh, I guess they're not expecting me yet. Maybe I'll try back in a few years."

Focus group participants who were single said they were not looking for programs for "singles," which often feel like "meat markets." Rather, they are interested in meaningful programming which engages them intellectually, spiritually and politically and does not leave them feeling as though they are less than whole people if they are not married or partnered, if they have no children, or if they are widowed or divorced.

In most Jewish communities – not just synagogues but in community stuff – I feel invisible, or left out, or like there's something wrong with me.

I don't have a partner and I don't have children, so that's one of the struggles with being a Jewish woman. Where is there a place for the woman who is solo and Jewish and still, in the eyes of Judaism, [to] be seen as a full participating member?

The lack of value attributed to Jewish women without partners was clearly related, in the minds of many focus group participants, to the expectation that Jewish women will become mothers.

⁷⁹ United Jewish Communities (2003).

⁸⁰ Fishman (1995).

⁸¹ Hartman, Moshe and Hartman, Harriet (1996). *Gender Equality and American Jews*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

⁸² Waxman, Chaim I. (2001). *Jewish Baby Boomers: A Communal Perspective*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Regardless of how much a woman is contributing to the Jewish future, she is often treated as if she is not doing enough if she does not have children. One rabbi reported she felt she was always treated as somewhat of a child while she was single and childless. Nonetheless, women without partners who did have children also reported obstacles to their full inclusion.

I was part of a synagogue when I was a single parent. I had no one to talk to. The women wouldn't talk to me, because they were with their husbands. The husbands wouldn't talk to me, because they would be afraid their women wouldn't be so happy about that. It was horrific! Of course, you know what happens: you drop out because you're not going to subject yourself to that for any length of time. . . . It has changed some, but I don't think it has changed all that much.

4.4.3 Pressure to Marry Pushes Women Away

Focus group participants reported that the pressure put on them by Jewish communal leaders to marry and become mothers had directly and negatively impacted their participation in the Jewish community. Young women also reported feeling disrespected and insulted by older male rabbis and academics who lectured them about the need to have children before the age of 30.

One of the things that actually caused me to leave Jewishness and Judaism behind for many years was an experience I had when I was going off to graduate school and I was seeking advice about where I should go. It turned out that my academic advisor was also the director of Hillel. This man said, "You need to go to Brandeis." I said, "Okay, so tell me about the program in literature there." He said, "No, you need to go to Brandeis so that you can meet a nice Jewish man." . . . I looked at him and without even knowing what I was saying – I was not terribly courageous, I was just terribly honest – "I'm not sure I really want children." He proceeded to give me a lecture that smart Jewish women need to have kids. "And if you don't, we're going to die as a people." It was like, "Whoa! I'm going in to get professional advice."

The women who shared such stories were certain their male cohorts were not being similarly treated. They thus indicated women remain unequally targeted by those concerned about reproduction rates in the Jewish community. They also suggested the Jewish community must expand its notion of the ways Jewish women and men can contribute to the Jewish future.

It seems to me that one of the things the Jewish community at large, and perhaps especially Jewish educators, need to become more sensitive to and need to get better at is understanding there are lots of different ways to contribute to the next Jewish generation. There is a sense if you either cannot, or even worse, have chosen not to reproduce, you are in some way betraying the Jewish future. I think Jewish reproduction is really important, and educating Jewish children is really important, but there are lots of different ways besides physical reproduction that we can contribute to the next generation.

Some focus group participants suggested that the gap in institutional life for women without partners or children was a perfect arena for a Jewish women's organization to step in.

If there is a role for “progressive” Jewish women’s organizations to play, it’s creating a space for younger women [and all] women ...that’s not defined by finding a mate and not defined by motherhood; that’s defined by political activism, intellectual stimulation, the camaraderie of other women.

While such programming would clearly fill a gap, organizational attention to the larger issues that contribute to the marginalization of singles and non-parents is also a priority.

4.5 Older Women

4.5.1 Background

The median age of the Jewish community is older than it was ten years ago and older than the median age of the general American population. Nineteen percent of the American Jewish population is over the age of 65. Compared to Jews under 65, Jews over 65 participate in equal or greater numbers in Jewish communal institutions, give to Jewish charities, and affiliate with Jewish organizations (NJPS, 2000-01).⁸³

4.5.2 Study Findings

Many focus group participants who were older than 65 felt underutilized and undervalued by the Jewish community. Some felt their opinions and experiences were not solicited, and they were not seen as assets to the Jewish community or to Jewish women’s organizations. They also spoke of wanting more programming that treated them as fully functioning and active adults. Older women also expressed the need to have clergy and other Jewish professionals undergo training on issues of aging. Others said the transition of aging was one not addressed adequately by the Jewish community. Women who have been central to their families for many years suddenly find themselves in a diminished role, confident they still have much to give but left with no clear path for contributing to their communities.

Older women have so much to offer. They are completely ignored in a lot of cases.

Women... have spent a lifetime giving. They’re the helpers, the givers, the nurturers. Then, all of a sudden, the role ends and they’re no longer necessary to do much, except stand by... It’s the frustration of not being able to take advantage of the capabilities you know you can still give. There’s no place to go with it.

While some older women embraced the idea of being seen as wise elders in the community others rejected such language and approaches as patronizing.

I don’t want to be in a circle of elders, thank you. I want to be right in there where they’re making the decisions. (U)nless we have a lot of money. . . we are not chosen, although we’ve got press experience, marketing experience, administrative experience, strategic planning experience, union experience – whatever it is. But you take a look

⁸³ United Jewish Communities (2003).

and there's a piece of gray hair and you go past it and underneath it, as though we're not there. Pushed aside. Invisible. They walk right past me.

As the above quotation indicates, the marginalization of older women is not uniform. Thus age needs to be considered in connection with other factors: economic means and sexual orientation. The following focus group participant expresses her sense of invisibility as connected to various aspects of her identity.

I feel the invisibility in being Jewish, a woman, a lesbian, and 69. There is no niche. There is no place to fit in... Nobody really [cares]... about who I am. The establishment doesn't.

Institutions can respond to such experiences by creating programs that specifically address the needs of older women but not assuming all needs and experiences are identical. As another focus group participant expressed it,

I want spaces where we can talk about those [issues] as older women--older women who have been abused, who have been alcoholic, who are just growing older. Some of this stuff that couldn't be talked about way back then is now in front of us. There's really no space to talk about it.

4.6 Jewish Lesbians, Queer and Bisexual Women and Transgender People

4.6.1 Background

1973 was not only a watershed year for Jewish feminism it was also the year in which the first two gay synagogues in the world were established, one in Los Angeles and the other in New York. While some women found themselves at home in these synagogues in their early years, many did not. The synagogues, like other gay institutions of their era were often dominated by gay men. During the 1970's Jewish lesbians could also be found in the Jewish feminist movement, the general feminist movement and lesbian feminist activities, organizations and communities. It was not until the early 1980s that a larger more easily identifiable group of Jewish lesbians began collectively exploring and writing about their identities as Jews, lesbians and feminists.⁸⁴

Over the course of two decades since this initial flourishing of activity, many changes have taken place within the progressive Jewish movements, gay liberation movements and feminist movements. These changes have impacted the identities of Jewish lesbians. Gay men and lesbians have increasingly worked together on behalf of a shared political and equal rights agenda, and the movement has expanded its ranks and changed its terminology to include the experiences and needs of bisexuals and transgendered people.⁸⁵ Younger generations have increasingly adopted the term "queer," using it both as an umbrella term covering lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities,

⁸⁴ Rogow, Faith (1990). "Why is This Decade Different from All Other Decades: A Look at the Rise of Jewish Lesbian Feminism," *Bridges*, 1:1, 70.

⁸⁵ "Transgender" is an umbrella term that encompasses individuals who cross gender boundaries and whose sense of self is not determined by assigned birth sex, initial gender role, or genitalia. In common usage transgender is often shortened to "trans." See: Feinberg, Leslie (1996). *Transgender Warriors*. Boston: Beacon Press.

and as a term that implies an alternative to norms of gender and sexuality.⁸⁶

Jewish LGBTQ visibility has increased significantly over the last two decades. The publication of *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology* in 1982 represents an important watershed in Jewish lesbian visibility as it shared with readers across the nation (and world) the experiences of Jewish lesbians, many of whom wrote about experiences of anti-Semitism in the lesbian feminist movement. Since then, many more books have been published that include stories and reflections on and by Jewish lesbians, bisexuals, and queer-identified women; these include *Tribe of Dina*, *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*; *Like Bread on the Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition*, *Queer Jews* and *Lesbian Rabbis: The First Generation*. The experiences of transgender Jews are also increasingly being written about in journals, magazines and anthologies.

Data on LGBTQ Jews are almost non-existent given that Jewish demographic studies have only very recently begun to inquire about sexual orientation. Nonetheless, it is clear that the population of openly identified LGBTQ Jews is growing, as are the number of LGBTQ synagogues, organizations, and publications in the US. One recent study of Jewish lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer women in Northern California found a high percentage involved in organized Jewish life.⁸⁷

A recent study on attitudes among Jews about progressive issues found that that 52% of Jews believe that gays and lesbians should be able to marry legally, with slightly more Jewish leaders concurring. Just over a fifth of Jews believe that it is wrong for adults of the same sex to have sexual relations, while only 7% of JCPA leaders felt the same way.⁸⁸

Open discussion of transgender people in the Jewish community is still in its nascent stages. The first openly transgender student was accepted into rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College in 2003.⁸⁹ The Reconstructionist and Reform seminaries both recently held symposia on the transgender issues and the Reform movement's Commission on Social Action recently passed a resolution pledging to support legislation opposing discrimination based on gender identity and urging Reform congregations to develop inclusive policies toward all Jews "regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity." The resolution further requested the rabbinic and cantorial arms of the movement discuss ritual participation of and for transgender Jews.

⁸⁶ Jagose, Annamarie (1996). *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

⁸⁷ Kisber, Susie Loveman (1999). "A Comparison of Non-Parents, Parents and Prospective Parents Who are Jewish Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer-Identified Women: Differences in Their Identities, Lifestyles, Families, Social Networks, and Received Social Support." (Written for the California School of Professional Psychology at Alameda.)

⁸⁶ Cohen, Steven M. (2000). *Religion and the Public Square: Attitudes of American Jews in Comparative Perspective*. Philadelphia, PA.: Center for Jewish Community Studies.

⁸⁹ Cohen, Debra Nussbaum (2003). "Testing the Borders of Inclusivity," *The New York Jewish Week*, 3/14/2003.

4.6.2 LGBTQ Jews

Focus group participants who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) expressed the belief that things are improving in the Jewish community but more change is needed. Pockets of tolerance, integration and acceptance exist, but many still remain on the margins of Jewish life. One indication of increasing acceptance of those who identify as LGBTQ was the overwhelming support by focus group participants for gay and lesbian rabbis.

- 90% of focus group participants would accept a gay or lesbian rabbi as their spiritual leader.

Most focus group participants who identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer or transgender spoke of having found a community in which they felt at home. Gay and lesbian synagogues offer a haven for many focus group participants, while others have found community in mixed progressive institutions and synagogues .

[The GLBT synagogue]... is the one place that I don't even think about it, because I feel fully integrated there and it's not an issue. I don't have that feeling when I go to other synagogues.

I've found a community where I feel completely at home. I feel completely at home at [my progressive synagogue]. I feel comfortable there as a woman, being gay, being gender-queer. I just feel very comfortable there. It's a wonderful, welcoming community.

Focus group participants seeking acceptance for themselves and their families in mainstream Jewish institutions are experiencing mixed success. Some focus group participants described being part of diverse inclusive communities, while others described being treated as tokens, feeling invisible, or being denied opportunities or basic respectful treatment.

By their responses to individuals, rabbis can open or close doors. A woman organizing a program on preventing gay and lesbian teen suicide reported that she was rebuffed by the rabbi of the large synagogue she approached who insisted that there was no need for her program because “we don’t have that problem.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, a young woman shared her experience of being reassured by her Hillel rabbi that the Jewish community could remain a home for her.

When I first came out, I almost left Judaism completely, because I wasn't accepted. It was a rabbi at my university who told me, "No, you can really be gay and Jewish at the same time." ... I find there are great conflicts in the Jewish community between my Jewish identity and my gay identity, but there are no conflicts within me.

4.6.3 *Mixed Messages: Working in the Jewish Community*

Some lesbians who work in the Jewish community reported they have received mixed messages about how “out” they can be, and some have fought hard for benefits for their partners.

As much as I like to say that I'm out at work and everything is fine, it's not. I still struggle, working in the Jewish community, being a lesbian....

At a former job, where I was a Hebrew teacher, I was given a pretty mixed signal as a lesbian. I was told at certain moments that it was good to tell the kids; it was good to be out; I was a good role model for them. Then, when I had tried to do a unit on life cycle and had brought in pictures that were appropriate to the curriculum, I got a talking-to for having done that.

Another focus group participant who worked in a major national Jewish women’s organization offered a somewhat different experience. She found that, in her professional work, she felt far more comfortable being “out” as a lesbian than as a patrilineally-descended Jew.

When I was there, I was out as a lesbian and I was comfortable with being out as a lesbian. My mother isn't Jewish. I was raised as a Jew. I was not out about the fact that my mother wasn't Jewish. So that was a weird experience.... That's the last time I had part of my identity hidden, that I felt uncomfortable about....

4.6.4 *Homophobia in the Jewish Community Hurts*

Many LGBTQ focus group participants indicated that while they have experienced homophobia and heterosexism outside of the Jewish community, they feel particularly vulnerable to a lack of acceptance from other Jews. Some also indicated they believe they would be more protected from homophobia outside the Jewish community.

The Jewish community is my home base. In other parts of my life, if people have a conflict with my sexual orientation, I don't really care that much, but when it happens in the Jewish community, it's in my house and it's really not okay.

Being involved in the Jewish community gives me cause to come into contact with more homophobia and heterosexism than I might otherwise have cause to do.

LGBTQ Jews singled out the Conservative movement as particularly difficult. The fact that progress has been made on women’s issues within the movement heightens some women’s anger and pain at the lack of progress on LGBTQ inclusion.

The one place where I feel way more assaulted as a gay person than as a female person..[is] within the Conservative movement, where there are a number of rights and privileges that gays and lesbians don't have.

Women are included in the service and all of that stuff, but... there is no place for queer people.

Lesbians who feel they have benefited greatly from Jewish communal institutions, including institutions of the Conservative movement, are deeply troubled by the homophobia in those institutions and are uncertain about how much change is currently possible.

Ramah camping was probably the single most important part of my developing Jewish identity... In recent years, I've heard stories about kids of gay parents looking into the camp and the response they got from the director, whom I've known for years and years. It's very sad to me, because as a kid there I always imagined that I would send my kids there... It feels like a huge loss to me that I wouldn't want to send my kids there right now and that so many kids who are part of gay families, or who are gay, are missing out on an opportunity to be educated, because it's such a profound educational experience, living it there. I often say I'm going to write a letter... I don't believe it would do anything, but I feel it's important to be heard.

Those focus group participants who have found themselves in secure and accepting communities nonetheless want the larger Jewish community to continue to change, particularly because they are concerned about the needs of LGBTQ families.

I'd like to see more support for families of gay and lesbian people in the Jewish world. I'd like to see more panels in synagogues and straight rabbis talking about homosexuality, so that our parents and relatives can tell [people], "My daughter had a baby," ... We have each other for support, but they have no support... support in a Jewish context.

LGBTQ focus group participants expressed the desire to be integrated into existing programs rather than set "off to the side." A pregnant lesbian spoke of her desire for LGBTQ parenting issues to be integrated into Jewish communal parenting programming and material.

As a lesbian, I want to feel ... not like we're an afterthought, or "okay we'll do some programming..." but that we're integrated... that we're not thought of as this exceptional community off to the side. That's something I look forward to .

Several focus group participants, who did not necessarily identify as LGBTQ, indicated the issue of gay and lesbian ordination within the Conservative movement was a priority for them. As one college senior exclaimed,

Is my synagogue going to hire a gay and lesbian rabbi? Is my synagogue going to perform a commitment ceremony? Those are the things I care more about as the most pressing issues. Getting the basic civic and religious rights for everybody takes precedence for me over redefining liturgy or things like that. I hope we get to that, but those are my most important goals.

4.6.5 Transgender Identities and Awareness

Transgender people and their allies, while not representing a high percentage of focus group participants, suggested some areas of challenge and potential new thinking for Jewish feminists and others who care about creating inclusive communities. Transgender focus group participants and their supporters strongly suggested that Jewish, Jewish feminist, and gay and lesbian organizations need to expand their thinking about gender and begin to change their language to be fully inclusive. Education around gender and sexuality in Jewish settings also needs to include material on transgender experience.

I think education [is important], because there's so much rich material in our tradition that speaks about people who today we would call trans- or inter-sex.... It's so exciting that we have this right here in our tradition and it's thousands of years old and it's so much more advanced than where most of the Jewish community is today. I feel if we knew that, if it were taught in synagogues and in other educational settings and in seminaries, that would make a huge difference... I feel it's really incumbent upon straight allies to start speaking out and to do education about trans-folks and inter-sex folks and get people comfortable with the language. Let people see that you can say the word "transgender" and the sky won't fall in, it will be fine.

We're challenging notions of gender and expanding ourselves to a fuller definition of what gender is and making room for people to explore gender in new ways. I'd really like to see Jewish feminism embrace that as something that isn't just a freakish San Francisco experience, but a way that we start to rethink gender.

When asked to explain how any organization might begin to accept the challenge of taking transgender experience more seriously, one focus group participant pointed out the limitations of the language used in the surveys and focus groups:

First of all, the language wouldn't be women/men; it would be talking about genders, about how one expresses one's gender. It would be understanding feminist liberation as everyone of every gender being able to be most fully themselves and unlimited by their gender.

Whether or not these issues should become more central in Jewish feminist organizations and in the Jewish community was far from universally agreed upon. Four out of 38 focus groups discussed transgender issues and even among them there was uncertainty about whether the Jewish community as a whole was ready to tackle the complexity of gender.

I'm realizing that it's the step after understanding that women and men are equal. For people who aren't there, I think it would be a mistake to skip that step.... After you know that women are equal, let's talk about multiple genders.

I don't think the gender revolution is where we're at yet, as a country, as a people. I'm way back in reproductive rights. I think the Jewish community really needs to get on top of the political chaos that is unfolding.

Nonetheless, it is clear Jewish feminists and Jewish feminist organizations should seek to educate themselves further about transgender issues; this is a requisite part of creating inclusive Jewish communities. The fact that Ma'yan did not offer a check off box for transgender or queer identification on its survey indicates that Jewish feminist groups still fail to take small but significant steps to increase LGBTQ inclusiveness.

4.7 Intermarriage

4.7.1 Background

The issue of intermarriage—how to properly calculate its frequency in the American Jewish community, how to understand and respond to its “causes” and consequences—has been a subject of much controversy in American Jewish circles. This study did not ask women to identify as married to Jews or not, nor did the questionnaire ask women who are Jews by choice to identify as such. Nonetheless, focus group discussions made clear that Jews by choice as well as women with non-Jews in their families were well represented among participants.

The NJPS 2000-1⁹⁰ offers data on intermarriage organized by the year the marriage began. Of marriages of Jews between 1996-2000, 47% were between a Jew and a non-Jew. Between 1991-1995, that number was 43%. Among all Jews currently married, 31% are intermarried. Women over 55 and under 35 are less likely than men to be intermarried. Fifteen percent of intermarried Jews belong to a synagogue compared to 59% of Jews married to other Jews.

4.7.2 Exclusion of the Intermarried and Their Families

When asked to speak about experiences of exclusion in the Jewish community, several focus group participants spoke of feeling excluded because of Jewish institutions’ approach to intermarriage and interfaith relationships. Some spoke poignantly about the search for a rabbi who would even agree to talk to them about performing a wedding. Many spoke of their own partners or one of their parents not being Jewish or of their children or grandchildren not feeling welcomed.

I would like to see more inclusion for interfaith families, and people who make the conscious decision to raise their children Jewish should be included at any cost. As comfortable as I feel at my synagogue, I don't see that happening. I think we're losing people.

Women spoke of the need for rituals that would welcome non-Jewish allies of Jews into the Jewish community and of the need for curricula for children of interfaith families, particularly around the holidays. Some women felt rabbis should have the option to perform marriages for whomever they choose and intermarried individuals should be eligible for ordination as rabbis. Others argued that Jewish feminists should pay more attention to interfaith issues not simply out of a general commitment to inclusive communities, but because pressures put on young women and men about inter-dating and intermarriage are gendered.

⁹⁰ United Jewish Communities (2003).

I think intermarriage is a big issue. . . . There is a gender issue there in that there are more female converts than male converts in general, partly because of the halakhic issue, but partly, I think, because of familial expectations about what the mother's role is in passing on tradition.

4.8 Sephardi and Mizrahi Women and Jewish Women of Color

In the introduction to her recent anthology of writings by Jewish women of North African and Middle Eastern descent, Loolwa Khazzoom writes that for a long time she believed she and her sister were the only feminists from their background. The very appearance of the anthology *The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage* testifies that this world-wide population is vibrant, diverse and increasingly vocal.

Ma'yan encountered some difficulty in arranging to speak to women within Sephardi⁹¹ and Mizrahi⁹² communities. We were told that anything coming from a feminist organization would be suspect. Nonetheless, through informal friendship circles, we were able to convene one group of exclusively Sephardi and Mizrahi women. Other Sephardi and Mizrahi women took part in mixed groups. What emerged from these discussions was a clear need for greater awareness among Ashkenazi-centered organizations, including feminist organizations, of their biases. Given the tremendous diversity of the Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish communities in the United States, and significant generational differences, further research on women in these communities is needed. The Jewish community should commit to design programs and educational materials more inclusive of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewish women and their experiences.

Sephardi and Mizrahi focus group participants shared some of the experiences of other Jews of color who participated in the focus groups. While individuals and institutions can be very welcoming to individual Jews of color, assumptions that all Jews are white and Ashkenazi remain widespread in North American Jewish institutions. This alienates Jews of color and parents of adopted Jews of color, as well as Jews whose families come from Arab countries or are of Spanish descent. Jewish education focuses almost exclusively on Ashkenazi traditions and history and represents Jews as white. The histories and experiences of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews are largely absent from Jewish curricula. This adds to the invisibility of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews. Sephardi and Mizrahi women, who have historically been provided with fewer educational opportunities than their male counterparts, would welcome more avenues through which to learn their history.

I took a course on understanding Jewish history that was put on by one of the major Jewish organizations.... In this book that was our text... that was put out by this same organization, there is one section in which they give a few pages of coverage to "exotic" Jewish communities. The instructor... he's a head honcho guy here.... He said, "We're not going to cover these exotic, obscure communities, because I don't think they're that important." That was it and he marched on. I sat there with my jaw on the floor.

⁹¹ Jews descended from the Jewish communities of Spain (known in Hebrew as *Sepharad*) and Portugal.

⁹² Literally Hebrew for "Eastern;" the term is used to refer to Jews from North Africa, the Middle East Central and East Asia.

Sometimes I feel excluded in terms of cultural norms. In most Jewish organizations, the cultural norm tends to be Ashkenazi. For lack of a better way to put it, it tends to be white. My experience in the world has not been particularly white. So I often feel the cultural references that are assumed to be Jewish norms are not all my cultural references. I often feel uncomfortable.

Sephardi and Mizrachi focus group participants shared their interest in preserving and laying claim to the unique historical roles of women in their communities, while at the same time taking full advantage of their opportunities as American women. Some women spoke of their desire to hear the voices of Mizrachi and Sephardi women singing traditional songs they had only heard men sing. Others discussed feeling frustrated with the current choices of going either to a traditional non-egalitarian synagogue where they could pray according to their family traditions, or an Ashkenazi egalitarian synagogue which honors their experience as women but feels and sounds very foreign.

Some focus group participants sounded an alarm: the Jewish community is changing, becoming less white. Its norms must also change.

There are a lot of children of color, who are not from a Jewish background, who are being adopted by Jewish families. Ten years from now, those kids are going to be having bar or bat mitzvah, or they're going to be young adults. Ten years from now, it's going to look really different. What I think is going to need change, somewhere, somehow—I don't know how—between now and then, is that there really is going to have to be less of an emphasis on Ashkenazi being normative for Jews.

4.9 Conclusion

Jewish women continue to experience exclusion from Jewish communal institutions and synagogues based on their gender, age, class, ethnicity/race, sexual orientation, gender identity, stage of life, and their partnerships/marriages to non-Jews. More thoughtful attention must be given to the multiple vectors of identity individuals carry.

Lack of inclusion must be addressed through proactive strategies to make the Jewish community as a whole more inclusive through creating more inclusive policies, and through specific programming to meet the specialized needs of marginalized groups. Given there are many new organizations working on a variety of these issues, from interfaith inclusion to gay and lesbian organizations, it might be useful for a Jewish feminist organization to partner with some of these organizations in a way that also takes seriously the gendered component of the issue at hand.

5. RELIGIOUS LIFE

- Participants expressed excitement about the sweeping changes in their religious lives due to the impact of feminism, and reported seeking out Jewish communities that would fully include them.
- Women rabbis are powerful signifiers of inclusion.
- Many of the women surveyed have embraced gender-sensitive liturgical changes, prayer garb such as *kippah*, *tallit* and *tefillin*, and new inclusive rituals, and some desire to reclaim traditionally female practices such as *mikveh*.
- There is a growing sense that in order for feminist change to take root in the life of a congregation it should actively involve men as well as women.

5.1 Introduction

The most dramatic and measurable changes for Jewish women over the past three decades of feminist activism have been in the arenas of religious life and Jewish education. In 1971 when *Ezrat Nashim*, the first grassroots activist group of Jewish feminists advocating for change in the religious realm, presented its platform at the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly conference, no American woman had been ordained as a rabbi or invested as a cantor. Few girls celebrated their *b'not mitzvah* (pl.), and women in the Conservative movement were not counted in *minyanim* (pl.) or allowed to read from the Torah. Girls across denominations were far less likely than boys to receive a thorough Jewish education.

By the mid-'80's, the landscape of Jewish life had changed significantly for women. In 1972 the Reform Movement ordained its first woman rabbi; the Conservative Movement followed in 1985. Synagogues witnessed a sea change as a majority of Conservative synagogues became egalitarian in practice. Girls began to celebrate *b'not mitzvah* on Saturday mornings, and a range of ceremonies were created to welcome baby girls into the Jewish community. *Rosh Chodesh* groups and women's seders were organized around the country.

In response to criticisms of traditional Jewish liturgy's gender discrimination— references to worshippers as well as to God are exclusively in the masculine— most liberal American prayer books have shifted to prayers with gender-neutral or “gender-sensitive” English. All the newer editions of the prayer books of the liberal movements have incorporated these changes to a greater or lesser extent. Prayer books have also added the names of the matriarchs to the prayers honoring the forefathers, at least as an alternative version of the traditional words. The Jewish Renewal and Reconstructionist movements, more radically, have created gender-balanced prayers in both English and, in some cases, Hebrew: prayers refer to God and people in both masculine and feminine language. Innovations in liturgy have in many cases begun with writing by individual Jewish women. Most notably, Marcia Falk has created her own prayer-book, *The Book of Blessings*,⁹³ using new imagery and language to reflect feminist theology and practice. Many other Jewish women are participating in the invention of new prayers that are being included in

⁹³ Falk, Marcia (1996). *The Book of Blessings*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

synagogue services and non-traditional rituals. Others are recovering historical material on women's customs and prayers.

The advent of rituals celebrating women's lives is a significant indication of women's public presence in the American religious scene. Since the "radical" *bat mitzvah* of Judith Kaplan Eisenstein in 1922, the *bat mitzvah* has now become commonplace in all liberal movements, and *bat mitzvah* requirements and privileges for girls are generally now equal to those for boys. In the Orthodox movement, more recently, it has become commonplace to celebrate a daughter's *bat mitzvah* with a party or a sermon given after synagogue, or even with a women's Torah service. Baby naming and covenanting ceremonies for girls are now widespread in all denominations of Judaism, so much so that there are now books available to help in planning such events. Other rituals for women – those marking aging, coming out, miscarriage, divorce, and other important, once-ignored events – are rarer, but are becoming familiar, particularly in feminist literature about women's rituals. Women have also formed their own spiritual communities, such as *Rosh Chodesh* groups and women's study groups, to experiment with new ideas, roles, and rituals.

Even in Orthodox circles, where *halakha* presents more serious obstacles to change, women have made great strides. The movement of feminism within Orthodoxy has been growing steadily over the past decades, and its members are among the most vocal and active religiously identified Jewish feminists today. Over the past five years, thousands of Orthodox women and men have attended conferences sponsored by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, an organization founded in 1997. The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, which offers full-time yeshiva study for women's learning, has been educating both Orthodox and non-Orthodox women in traditional texts for over twenty years and now trains women to teach in Orthodox day schools. The Women's Tefilla Network is an international network of Orthodox women members of prayer groups with an active listserv. And Orthodox feminists have been critical in the ongoing struggle for women to legally pray together at the Western Wall.

In some Modern Orthodox spheres, women have assumed roles as religious leaders, often as respected teachers of Jewish text. Two women in the New York area have served as congregational interns. In Israel, women have been trained as *To'annot* to help *agunot* win the right to Jewish legal divorces. *Yoatzot* are trained to work with women primarily on questions of family purity questions. While women's prayer groups where Orthodox and other traditional women can chant Torah and pray out loud together have been meeting for over 30 years, a few modern Orthodox settings recently have permitted women to chant Torah with men present. Marking a girl's becoming a *bat mitzvah* in some significant way has become normative in most centrist and modern Orthodox settings. Baby naming ceremonies for girls have also become accepted.⁹⁴

As Jewish women have begun to enjoy the fruits of their unprecedented access to Jewish education and to positions of religious leadership, new questions have also emerged. Jewish feminists have pioneered new explorations of theology, ritual, history, liturgy and sacred text. This process has

⁹⁴ Fishman, Sylvia Barack (2000). *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Life*. New York: American Jewish Committee, 41.

already yielded rich results, controversial and even heretical to some, and life-giving and essential to others. These include new biblical commentaries and *midrashim*, a plethora of new rituals and communal observances, prayers and liturgical innovations, sustained gendered analyses of Jewish texts, the development of Jewish feminist theologies and new *teshuvot*. Such explorations have made clear Jewish feminism is transforming Judaism not simply by integrating women into roles once reserved for men, but by more fundamentally engaging it in a sustained confrontation with gender analysis and feminist critique and creativity.

5.1.1 Ma'yan's Role in Religious Change

From its very first public program, a feminist seder held in 1994, Ma'yan has played a significant role in bringing into the mainstream some of the most exciting new rituals and celebrations innovated by Jewish feminism. After its first seder, Ma'yan held a series of *Rosh Chodesh* experiences and then launched additional educational and spiritual programs in the fall of 1995. In addition to hosting feminist seders and publishing a feminist *haggadah*, Ma'yan has held programs and rituals for many Jewish holidays, always with the goal of providing a uniquely feminist approach to holidays and rituals. Ma'yan has held two ritual art exhibitions that have spurred creativity and generated interest in the development of Miriam's Cups and of Esther/Vashti Purim flags. Ma'yan also commissioned an original *Ushpizot* chart portraying seven female prophets to be hung in *sukkot* (pl.) by families interested in egalitarian holiday observances. In partnership with Kolot: The Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, Ma'yan has developed ritualwell.org, an extensive web resource of rituals for lifecycle events and holidays. Ma'yan has also developed curriculum and offered classes, workshops and a Shabbaton addressing topics including women in the Torah and Midrash, preparing for your *bat mitzvah*, and feminist liturgy. Ma'yan has sponsored Rosh Chodesh groups and women's *tashlich* rituals, and, for many years, has co-sponsored with the Drisha Institute, a pre-Shavuot *tikkun* featuring women scholars teaching on a variety of themes. Ma'yan has always been committed to exposing participants in its programs and users of its materials to feminine God language and a range of creative liturgy.

5.2. Impact of Jewish Feminism on Women's Religious Lives

Most focus group participants spoke enthusiastically about the successes and achievements of Jewish feminism in the religious realm and related personal stories about the impact of Jewish feminism on their religious lives. Many also continue to express a sense of awe at how much change they have experienced. They made it clear they believe Jewish feminism has made it possible to have a life as a religiously affiliated Jewish woman.

I'm still amazed how much things have changed. When I think back on those first women who were involved in rituals and how odd that looked and how strange it felt and how far we've come in our lifetime, it really is remarkable.

For me, the whole new consciousness in that first conference on the role of women in Jewish life in 1973 really was a transformative moment. It just seemed to me that this made living Jewishly exciting and more personally meaningful. It really opened doors.

For some focus group participants, speaking about Jewish feminism's impact on their religious lives brought back memories of earlier struggle and awakening. For others, the process of integrating feminism and Judaism is ongoing.

For me, it makes for a lot of confusion, because I feel very strongly about feminist values and I also feel very strongly about Judaism and Jewish ritual. So it is very hard, because there is so much work to do in the Jewish community in terms of feminism. There is a constant... whether it's "Am I going to wear a tallis? Am I going to wear a kippah?" Or even, do you change the opening lines of the Amidah, the most important standing prayer? Do you change that to include women? What does it mean that the pronoun for God is referred to as "He"? How do you make room for women in Judaism? Or shouldn't the room already be there?

Women still struggle with the challenges of Jewish feminism, and some remain uncomfortable with feminist and egalitarian practices different from the ones with which they grew up. Despite the significant impact feminism has had on the religious realm, the practical questions it raises in terms of how to live a Jewish life, are, for many, still very much alive. As will be shown below, those engaged in these ongoing struggles could benefit from proactive support and encouragement.

5.3 Women Choose Religious Settings That Support Women

Many focus group participants have made a conscious choice to join communities in which women have full access to religious life and education. Non-Orthodox women consider egalitarianism a critical factor in choosing a synagogue. Orthodox feminists measure a supportive religious community by its openness to the integration of women into all roles not prohibited by *halakha*.

Growing up in this community, having women be presidents and having women give divrei Torah and having women read Torah and Megillot has been part of making me feel included. Having opportunities to learn Talmud... Those have made me feel included.

I will say that that sort of connection with a Jewish community that is feminist-oriented made me feel completely at home, really inspired. It made a huge difference in my perception of Judaism, my practice of Judaism.

Many middle-aged and older women made a conscious choice to come back to Judaism or to synagogue life after being apart from it for many years. These focus group participants indicated severing all Jewish affiliation for a period of time made it easier to come back on their own terms. They have largely chosen to go only to places that are open and comfortable for them and where they will not have to fight to be included. For many focus group participants, "women's issues" were the reason they switched denominations or sought out new synagogues.

It's interesting, because it feels like I became Jewish again, or I chose Judaism, because I came back to it, and I came back to it in a way that reflected my ideals. I wouldn't have come back to a synagogue that didn't.

I came back to Judaism here. Two presidents have been women. We have a woman rabbi, a woman cantor. Women are all over the place. So I missed out on all the bad stuff.

For some women, the range of synagogue possibilities is still too limited. Jewish feminists who seek communities of halakhically committed Jews still find themselves having to compromise. One young woman who almost joined a Modern Orthodox synagogue, ultimately decided to join an egalitarian synagogue even though she felt she was compromising significantly by belonging to a synagogue with far fewer observant Jews like herself.

I hemmed and I hawed and I thought, do I really think women should be able to read from the Torah in public? That was my turning point. Fifty percent of my personal Jewish beliefs, traditions, and practice don't match with 99.9 percent of people that I share my shul with, but the ability to express myself freely as a Jewish woman was more important than to express myself as a traditional Jew. That's how I made that decision.

The unprecedented range of synagogues in Jewish life today makes it possible for most women to find or create communities in which they experience significant religious inclusion. Observant Jewish feminists still lack a sufficient number of such communities, as evidenced by the many stories of focus group participants unable to find daily *minyanim* where they could say *kaddish*.

5.4 Indicators of Religious Inclusion

Focus group participants often identified a Jewish feminist “click” moment, the first time they experienced the impact of feminism on their religious lives. In so doing they revealed the key components of religious inclusion in their lives. For some focus group participants, their “click moment” occurred when they held or chanted from a Torah for the first time. For others, the sign of inclusion was seeing a woman on the *bimah* for the first time, encountering a woman rabbi, or reading the work of a Jewish feminist scholar. For others personal transformation occurred when studying text, when using changed liturgy, when wearing a *tallit* for the first time, or while partaking in a new ritual. All these experiences demonstrate the impact of the Jewish feminist project on individual women and their religious lives.

The women who shared these experiences of religious inclusion represented the full spectrum of denominational affiliation. Often, they acknowledged their personal religious experience was related to the larger feminist movement, which had given them unprecedented access to religious roles, rites, and objects. Others described their experiences without making an explicit connection between their individual stories and the larger historical process of Jewish feminist transformation.

While most focus group participants spoke joyously about their participation in parts of religious life that previous generations of women (or they themselves) could not access, they also related

other emotions. Some women expressed ambivalence about taking on roles and rituals that traditionally have been the exclusive province of men. Others expressed opposition to or ambivalence about changing God language in Hebrew. While many women spoke of the power of wearing *tallitot*, *kippot* and *tefillin*, they also had concerns about adopting these traditionally male ritual garments. Some focus group participants also discussed their attachment to rituals traditionally performed by women such as candle-lighting and *mikveh*.

5.4.1 Role Models in the Religious Realm

Many focus group participants spoke about the impact of role models on their decision to become more involved in religious Jewish life. For many women, these role models have been women rabbis; for many others they also include peers who have assumed religious leadership by teaching Torah, reading Torah, leading services, and taking on other public roles.

Two things. One was seeing a woman on the bimah, a rabbi. The second thing was seeing my best friend read Torah, do the most beautiful Torah reading I have ever heard. That's what made me think that I could do it, too. Those two things were really important.

You can't bring about social change unless you have female role models, somebody for girls to look up to, somebody in front of the shul.

The impact of seeing other women take on religious leadership roles extends far beyond the religious sphere and can deeply impact a woman's sense of what is possible. Seeing another woman on the *bimah* often makes women feel included in a way not possible when women are absent from synagogue leadership. Focus group participants further described how observing other women taking *aliyot* (in egalitarian settings or in women's *tefilla*) inspired them to take *aliyot* themselves.

I remember the first time I saw a woman at the bimah. It was this amazing moment because, before that, I felt that my feminist self and my Jewish self were always going to be in opposition and I had to choose. It was seeing women at the bimah that made me say, "No, I don't have to choose and they can enrich one another."

When I see a woman up on the bimah, chanting and singing and leading a service, I feel very connected, like I'm part of it. That woman is representing me up there.

Seeing a diversity of women on the *bimah* was also spoken of as a harbinger of inclusion. A Chicana Jewish woman explained that seeing a white lesbian leading services made her feel welcome in a synagogue for the first time.

I had never belonged to a synagogue, had never really gone to synagogue... Then - twelve years ago, I was checking out services... I saw somebody up on the bimah who was then the cantorial leader. She was very obviously... out as a lesbian. I said, "Okay, this is a place where I can be." And I was right. So that spoke volumes about inclusion and non-inclusion... At the time, I was really self-conscious about coming in [to a synagogue], not only as someone who didn't have a Jewish education, but as somebody who I thought would look really brown compared to all these other people, who would look really fair... I really

saw myself represented in this blonde, blue-eyed, lesbian up on the bimah... it's something about leadership and visibility.

Seeing other feminists participate in religious life also helped focus group participants choose to remain religiously affiliated.

We were doing the presidential campaign for Geraldine Ferraro at Betty Friedan's house. We were just working and, all of a sudden, the phone rings and she's talking about if she's going to do Rosh Hashanah on Fire Island or in Manhattan with her grandchildren. I thought, Betty Friedan does Rosh Hashanah? If Betty Friedan does Rosh Hashanah, then I could do Rosh Hashanah and there is something I could find in Judaism.

Some focus group participants also discussed how Jewish feminist writers and scholars have been role models for them as religiously engaged Jewish feminists.

I've been a feminist forever and was not very Jewish; in fact, I was very secular. But I discovered my Judaism not quite ten years ago. For me, the first conflict was in reading Jewish texts... I'm trying to think of why I don't worry about it as much any more. I think maybe some of it is knowing that there are scholars out there who are pushing, pushing, pushing. There are people doing it. I can tell you who my role model is: Rachel Adler, because she... goes into the text and finds those pinpoints of light where the doors and windows are opening up for women and says, "That's part of my tradition, too."

The uniting theme of these various stories is the importance of role models in women's religious lives. Seeing women, and a diversity of women, in visible positions of leadership matters to other women. Knowing other women have been able to combine being feminists with being religiously engaged Jews makes women feel integration of their values as feminists and Jews is possible. It helps them feel they are represented and it encourages them to take on leadership themselves. The application of these stories to spheres beyond the religious realm is clear.

5.4.2 *Impact of Women Rabbis*

The existence and presence of women rabbis and cantors makes a palpable difference in the lives of many focus group participants. Women rabbis are powerful symbols and conveyors of inclusion. Focus group participants welcome and celebrate women's presence in the rabbinate and are excited about the ways in which women rabbis have become role models for them and for the children in their communities.

- 93% of survey respondents would accept a woman rabbi as their spiritual leader.
- 87% would advocate for women to be candidates if they were on their synagogue's rabbinic hiring committee.
- Less than 1% said they are uncomfortable at services led by women rabbis.

Some focus group participants had specifically sought out women rabbis and cantors as mentors, role models and teachers even if this entailed crossing denominational lines.

My (Conservative) synagogue was confused. . . . So if we wanted to be around a woman rabbi or a woman cantor, we went to one of the other shuls, one of the Reform shuls.

Others credit their positive exposure to Jewish feminism to women rabbis. They suggested women rabbis have often played a part in introducing Jewish feminist innovations into synagogues.

Unless there is a female rabbi at a synagogue, these things [Rosh Chodesh; women's rituals] don't happen. . . . I've been very fortunate in always being at a synagogue where there was either a female rabbi or a female cantor. So we're lucky.

I had a pretty early exposure to feminism in Judaism, because I had a woman and a male rabbi.

Some focus group participants also pointed out that having male feminist rabbis who encouraged and inspired them was very important to their personal and spiritual development. They further indicated senior male rabbis can play an important role in encouraging and educating their congregations to consider hiring women rabbis. Even those women who identified as initially opposed to women rabbis reported exposure had now fully changed their opinions.

The service led by a woman felt very different, very much more real to my experience. So the presence of women clergy, and the possibility of women in the clergy, and women having roles of leadership, is extremely important to me.

Focus group participants indicate they are frustrated with the continued resistance to hiring women rabbis in their synagogues and communities, particularly for senior leadership positions. Some synagogue members and board members worry boards are too fearful of imagined opposition to female rabbis and caution there may be a gap between leadership fears of resistance and actual acceptance of women rabbis.

I would hope to change the job situation for women rabbis and cantors. . . . I just know how hard it is for them in the job market. It's a hump to get over, when people grow up with clergy of both sexes it doesn't seem weird to them. I just wish we could get over that hump.

I have this dream that we're going to get to the point (probably after I'm long gone) that a woman rabbi won't even be an issue. I'd love to see a time when we got there. I don't think I'm going to.

These experiences convey the important role that rabbis in general, and women rabbis in particular, can play in the lives of Jewish women and in their relationship to both feminism and Judaism.

Some current rabbinical students may have less of an automatic commitment to feminism, because they are not members of the generation who fought for the right to serve in the rabbinate or who remember when it was closed to them. They could benefit from exposure to feminist rabbinic role models. These stories indicate the importance of providing women rabbis with significant public opportunities to demonstrate their leadership and serve in settings where they can influence a wide range of people.

5.4.3 *Changed Liturgy is an Important Signifier of Inclusion*

- Over 80% of survey respondents said they prefer prayers spoken in English be gender-sensitive.

Many focus group participants spoke poignantly about the effects of liturgical change on their personal engagement with prayer. Indeed, for some focus group participants the experience of prayer with inclusive liturgy has been life-changing.

You talk about your ancestors, the prayers of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But in this prayer, it was the women: Sarah Rebecca, Leah, Rachel. All of a sudden, those voices were there. I was crying. I just cried, because suddenly something spoke to me. I don't think I'd even realized that I had been feeling marginalized. Nothing had ever captured me or interested me at all in anything that went on until that moment. Then I realized: there's this whole world that is accessible to me. There are prayers that speak to me. There's a way of praying that I can be engaged in... That's what launched my process of Jewish involvement and discovery and engagement in the community.

Others indicated their individual use of feminine prayer language helps them feel more included in synagogue ritual. It also raises the consciousness of other congregants about the exclusivity of most traditional prayer book language.

In the context of being a member of a Conservative synagogue, I often find myself feminizing language so that I feel represented. I'm definitely in a minority there... standing isolated in that context... it makes a statement to the people around us that what is acceptable as the norm in ritual language isn't necessarily acceptable and excludes a lot of people.

While the majority of focus group participants were members of egalitarian synagogues, not all these synagogues used prayer books with gender-sensitive English. Many synagogues use old prayer books and make changes orally when reciting prayers aloud; some women indicated the resulting gap between the words on the printed page and those spoken out loud is a cause of uneasiness. They would like to see these changes in print.

5.4.3.1 *Desire for Prayers by Women*

- 90% of women would like to see prayers or poems by women incorporated into services.

Focus group participants widely supported the incorporation of prayers and commentary by women into the religious services they attend.

I think there are other prayers... that we can include in our services . . . Over the centuries, we've left out a lot. And it's men who have decided what to leave out. So I think we should go back. . . and say, "Here are some wonderful resources ... that we can pick and put back into our services and explore, that give more of a voice to these

same things that women may care about or have a natural affinity for and will actually round out and make our whole tradition a more whole, powerful tradition.”

While many resources are available from which individuals could draw such materials, more resources could certainly be made accessible. Possibilities include a women’s prayer book, a sourcebook of prayers by women, or an online resource of such materials.

5.4.3.2 *Process of Introducing Liturgical Change Matters*

Focus group participants indicated the process of introducing liturgical change into a community can impact its acceptance. Several focus group participants indicated they felt dissatisfied with the education they received from their rabbinic leadership around the introduction of the *imahot* into the *Amidah* in their Conservative synagogues.⁹⁵

The imahot were added... but there wasn't really a discussion as to why, why they weren't there in the first place. Do they belong there? If so, why? If not, why not? I think all of these sorts of decisions have to be made in a way that will allow people to understand why they're being made and why this would be viewed, not by everyone, but by particular groups, as moving forward and as an opportunity to allow the community to grow and to flourish.

Such comments suggest a continuing need for educational materials that clearly present a history of liturgical change, explain different approaches to it, and examine specific prayers in depth.

5.4.3.3 *Resistance to Changing Hebrew Liturgy*

While focus group participants widely supported the use of English gender-inclusive or gender-neutral language, they were much more significantly divided about changing Hebrew liturgy.

- 47% of women surveyed indicated they would like to see Hebrew prayers changed to be gender-sensitive.

Numerous focus group participants shared positive experiences of liturgical change in Hebrew as well in English. Others explained their hesitancy and/or opposition to liturgical change in Hebrew stems from two primary sources: discomfort with difficult, unfamiliar Hebrew and a commitment to retain and honor tradition and/or *halakha*.

There's that inner conflict. . . . This is what I know and this is what I'm used to. On the other hand, if you continue to say that about a lot of things, then they'll never be changed.

Some women expressed a tension between their own desire for comfort and their desire to expose children to new possibilities.

⁹⁵ *Imahot*, lit. mothers. This refers to the addition of the names of the foremothers into the opening blessing of the central daily *Amidah* prayer, which traditionally praises God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

I'm so used to the Conservative rituals and songs [that] when we add [the foremothers] in it throws me off. So I said it wasn't important to me. It is totally conditioning.

I can say, "Yes, I'm forty-eight years old, I intellectually understand that when we talk about 'He,' we don't really mean 'he.'" I can intellectualize that. . . . But children can't. They cannot do that. I think we need to open their world. I think that's our job, to open their world and say, "It's all possible."

Others appealed to tradition and authenticity and argued Hebrew prayers should not be tampered with. As two college students explained,

I strongly identify as a feminist, but for me. . . [liturgical change] isn't an issue. To me, it's an intrinsic part of the prayers that they are written in this way. . . . [I]f we're going to translate it into English and use gender-sensitive language, it's not real any more, it's not an authentic translation of what was written.

The reason that I don't feel comfortable with changing the Hebrew is that I think this is our tradition and this is our text. I feel uncomfortable even when people add in the imahot.

Many women, those who advocated for Hebrew liturgical change and those against it, acknowledged the feminist claim that there is a relationship between the values of a community and the language one uses in prayer and in discussions about God. In the words of one Orthodox woman:

Why would we expect our community to respect and value women as equal partners when all of our tefillot are masculine?

A workshop or curriculum about liturgical change, which could explore the history of liturgical change and feminist issues in Jewish prayer is needed. It could present a useful context within which synagogues could explore options for liturgical innovation. Any organization working on issues of liturgical innovation should also be sensitive to the different levels of response evoked by English and Hebrew changes. Further studies might measure the impact of introducing changes in different ways, in different denominations, and to Jews of different ages.

5.4.4 *Re-Imagining God*

Though related to the issue of liturgical change, the project of re-imagining God outside of exclusively masculine images or terms is a larger project than liturgical change. Some focus group participants believe re-imagining God is of real importance. The use of feminine God-language causes people to think differently about God and the world.

I think that having the idea that God is male really perpetuates in the society the idea that the male is dominant.

The thing that just gripped me, the first time I went to the Jewish Renewal service, was when [the] Rabbi .. said, "However you envision God to be," and that changed everything for me. God wasn't He. God wasn't anything specific – it was whatever I wanted it to be. . . . That sentence really changed my life.

These focus group participants explained having an exclusively male image of God had been an obstacle to spiritual exploration for themselves and for their children. Some discussed how the concept of the *Shekhina* and other kabbalistic ideas about God had enhanced their spiritual connection. Others indicated being invited to define God in their own terms and with their own images had been transformative.

Mothers and teachers in focus groups also discussed their desire to present children with a range of possible ways of thinking about God. One mother shared her concerns about how God is defined in her son's day school.

One of the concerns I had—and I spoke to the head of the school about it—is about what's the God-talk like at school? Is it gender-neutral? Last year they were talking at a family service about God and the rabbi was relating a story. One of the children said, "I can't see God. Where is God?" [My son] stood up and said, "God is inside of us." At four years old, he knows God is inside of him... There's no man with a white beard in his imagery of God. Sometimes he'll talk about "He," but I know from hearing him talk that's not what he envisions, because that's never been the kind of God-talk he's been exposed to. I'm very concerned, as he steps in as a kindergartener, what it's going to be like. So I've asked and I've started offering to connect people up and maybe my rabbi will come in and do a teaching for the teachers about God-talk, so it's going to be more appropriate to what I want my children to be learning.

Those interested in pursuing the question of how God is talked about and taught about in Jewish schools, might consider sponsoring more specific research on the question. Materials, curricula and/or training for teachers and parents on the issue should also be developed.

5.4.5 Access to Torah

Some focus group participants described their access to Torah as the central measure of their religious inclusion.

The first time I held that Torah was the most amazing experience of my life... We wrapped ourselves around with the tallis and I held the Torah. It was like, this is what I need... It's who I am. My life as a Jew is in that Torah. And to be denied the privilege of holding that is outrageous. It's just intolerable to me.

When you see the Torah for the first time... you see it looking into it... it was such a powerful moment. To think that it didn't happen to me until I was 53 years old! That's insane! Those kinds of exclusions are just not forgivable.

While the above women spoke of the power of their interaction with the physical object of the Torah scroll, others indicated studying Torah and or learning how to chant it has also been important to their sense of belonging as Jewish women. Some indicated they now teach other women these skills as a way of sharing with them the power of the experience.

5.4.6 *Reciting Kaddish*

Another signifier of inclusion and exclusion for focus group participants of many denominations was the ability to recite *kaddish* in a *minyan*. Daily egalitarian *minyanim* and traditional *minyanim* where women are welcome to say *kaddish* are still not widespread. Many women find themselves outside their regular communities when confronted with a death of a family member. Mourning is a time of heightened sensitivity, and it is not surprising that women are deeply affected both by experiences of exclusion and by surprising experiences of inclusion around *kaddish* recital.

So many women were blown out of their sense of belonging by not being included, not able to say kaddish for their parents. For so many women, that's the moment when they felt slapped across the face, when they felt suddenly, "Hey, they don't think I'm really a real Jew! I don't count."

I had to sit in a separate room and listen through the door. . . I have a year of stories like that. That is painful, because I know, in other places, these same men won't do unkindnesses. It's so hard to understand. Inclusion? I guess the year I was saying kaddish, too, at the JOFA conference, standing amongst all these women at a mixed kaddish, mixed minyan, and everybody answering "Amen" to my kaddish. I looked over at my sister and the two of us were in tears, because we never heard anybody answer us. Being in a congregation of women was just unbelievable!

5.4.7 *Lifecycle Rituals for Women and Girls*

Life cycle ritual and active participation in ritual life is clearly another signifier of inclusion for Jewish women. As focus group discussions revealed, some lifecycle rituals for women and girls are no longer considered new, innovative or particularly feminist. Others are still quite marginal.

- 80% of survey respondents had attended a baby-naming ceremony for a girl.
- 69% had attended an adult *bat mitzvah*.
- Less than 1% had attended an aging ceremony or *simchat chochmah*.

Some focus group participants discussed the importance of ritual around life events; they believe ritual makes life more meaningful. Some indicated they regularly create new rituals, and others suggested specific life cycle events that demanded the creation of new ritual: retirement, divorce, becoming a grandmother, becoming a mother-in-law, and ritual for older women. One woman suggested the invention of a ritual for “women who were slimed by not being counted in a *minyan*.” Though only 38% of survey respondents had used ritualwell.org, some spoke about how helpful it was to have easily accessible resources on baby-namings, and others indicated that pamphlets on other rituals would be helpful to them.

5.4.7.1 *Bat Mitzvah and Adult Bat Mitzvah*

While the celebration of *bat* and *bar mitzvahs* is now often identical, and in Orthodox circles meaningful *b'not mitzvah* ritual are becoming more widespread, many women carry memories of not having had the opportunity to have a *bat mitzvah* at all, or having had one in a way that was not respectful or meaningful.

I still can't get over the fact that I wasn't able to participate and do certain things when I was growing up. That creates tension for me.

Focus group participants who had had adult *b'not mitzvah* spoke about them as powerful experiences, enhanced by their strong feelings about this past exclusion. For at least one woman, the desire to have a *bat mitzvah* as an adult was motivated by her children's approaching *b'nai mitzvah* and her sense that she wanted to be a better role model to them.

...I realized that for me to be able to say to them, "You're going to do this [have a bar mitzvah]. It's important that you did this." That it's important that I do it, so that I can show them that it really is important. ...It was the first time I'd ever seen the inside of a Torah, the first time I'd ever worn a tallit.

Most focus group participants who talked about having an adult *bat mitzvah* did not directly label it as a "feminist" experience. This finding supports prior research that for most women and girls who participate in life-cycle ceremonies, the emotional power derives from "doing what *Jews* do, rather than from doing what men do."⁹⁶ Participation in these rituals is a way for women to express ownership of Judaism more than it is a way to express a commitment to feminism.⁹⁷ Nonetheless, there exists the possibility of linking an individual's experience of claiming an active role in Judaism with the ideals of feminism. Those interested in helping women make this connection might consider developing feminist materials for use in *bat mitzvah* preparation for adults and girls.

Widespread attendance at adult *bat mitzvah* and baby-naming ceremonies suggests that personal life cycle rituals that mirror or make up for the lack of traditional life cycle rituals for girls are among the most successful of Jewish-feminist-inspired innovations. They might, therefore, be good vehicles for presenting large numbers of interested women with more challenging innovations such as prayers using feminine God language. More work can also be done around publicizing less widely known rituals like aging ceremonies.

⁹⁶Fishman, Sylvia Barack (2001). "Women's Transformations of Public Judaism: Religiosity, Egalitarianism, and the Symbolic Power of Changing Gender Roles," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 17, 140.

⁹⁷Cousens, Beth (2002). *Adult Bat Mitzvah as Entrée into Jewish Life for North American Jewish Women*, HIRIJW Working Paper Series; Schoenfeld, Stuart (1992). "Interpreting Adult Bat Mitzvah: The Limits and Potential of Feminism in a Congregational Setting," in *Jewish Sects, Religious Movements, and Political Parties: Proceedings of the Third Annual Symposium of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization, Held on Sunday-Monday, Oct. 14-15, 1990* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press), 205-219.

5.4.7.2 Weddings/Commitment Ceremonies

The wedding/commitment ceremony was another life cycle event that could be transformative in terms of Jewish feminist consciousness. Several focus group participants discussed how designing their weddings or commitment ceremonies presented them with the opportunity to think about their religious commitments and to reconsider their approach to Jewish tradition as women. Some discussed choosing more traditional options for their wedding ceremonies, while others described this as a time when innovative ritual was particularly important to them.

- 90% of survey respondents believe engaged couples should be offered the option of having a fully egalitarian *ketubah*.

One young Orthodox feminist shared her frustration at not finding adequate resources on the options available to her in creating a more equal wedding ceremony within the boundaries of *halakha*. When she and her husband did succeed in creating a ceremony they felt was both feminist and *halakhic*, they were unsure of how to best share it with others like them.

5.4.8 Communal Women's Only Rituals

- 29% of survey respondents indicated they seek out women's-only ritual.
- 66% of survey respondents indicated they had participated in Jewish women's activities to be part of a women's community.

Close to a third of focus group participants specifically value the women's-only dimension of experiences like feminist seders, *Rosh Chodesh* groups, and women's retreats and study groups and consider these experiences central to their religious lives. For some, the creation and exploration of women's ritual, innovative and traditional, is a core source of meaning in their lives. Some expressed the importance of having spaces in which they can specifically explore their identity as Jewish women.

I don't think that it [Jewish feminism] is always a case of "Let's do everything the men do, or let's just be like men," because women have their own identity as well. It's a hard balance to strike. That's why I think feminist ritual is also very important, because it's important to find times and places where women can celebrate the fact that they are women and Jewish....

For some, this woman-only space is a temporary measure intended to create a safe, comfortable place for women to learn together before they fully enter into community with men.

The [study] group is all women. It was completely different from the co-ed groups. The dynamics were totally different.... There was a lot more sense of safety.

I see the need for some separation to bring [women] to a level where the men had that all along.

Others indicated they value having the opportunity to be in various types of spiritual settings, including both women’s-only celebrations and mixed settings.

I would be sad if praying with women was my only spiritual opportunity, but I would be sad if I didn't have the opportunity to only share with women. It's wonderful to have congregational male/female, young/old opportunities. Also, there's something very special about being just with women and having that sisterhood of sharing.

Focus groups also included many women who actively reject “rituals and traditions for women only” or who feel the time has come to integrate men into feminist ritual.

I'm not really so interested in women-specific ritual. I'm interested in looking at how ritual is gendered to begin with. I would love to have men there, drawn into that ritual, and have them think about their ritual. That's what I'm much more interested in and having discussions about that with men... . So this whole stage of still having to be separate in order even to be heard within the Jewish community is, to me, archaic.

I am not attracted to women's seders, to women's things like that, because I prefer a more integrated approach to the learning and participation and exploration of ritual. I think it elevates all of us to do that and I want everyone elevated together. If women are elevated over here, it does nothing, because we have to do it together. When we get there, we have to have enough strength and knowledge so that when we show up with men, the men don't dominate entirely. I'm more attracted to integrated family or community rituals that give... a different perspective, to things we may have looked at in certain ways, so that everybody grows together. I think that's how change and growth really happen.

These findings, and the specific responses to feminist/women’s seders discussed below, suggest Jewish feminist organizations, rabbis and others who create Jewish feminist programming must strike a balance between offering women’s-only ritual space and creating more opportunities for women and men to learn about and experience the impact of Jewish feminism together.

5.4.8.1 Feminist/Women’s Seders

- 63 % of survey respondents had attended a feminist or women’s seder.
- 52% of survey respondents indicated they would be interested in participating in a feminist Passover seder.

Most focus group participants had less exposure to holiday-related feminist ritual than to lifecycle rituals for women. Even feminist/women’s seders, which have grown in popularity around the country, had been attended by fewer focus group participants than adult *bat mitzvah* or baby-naming ceremonies. Many indicated their home celebrations of holiday rituals such as seders have changed over the years while others continue to participate in “very male” seders led by men in their families.

My experience is that, as feminist as I might be... my brother... usually leads the seder...[He is] very open to us bringing a feminist viewpoint perhaps, but it's still

bringing it to him. The younger women are not taking over that role. Until he dies, I doubt that will happen.

First time feminist/women's Seder participants spoke about their potential transformative impact. Others indicated their belief in the continued importance of such experiences.

I think one of the most high-impacting experiences I've had was the first Jewish women's seder I went to, using the Ma'yan Haggadah. Here I'm learning about these women—stuff I had never known—in a very well put together format. I really wanted to know more.

I still think there's going to be tremendous value, from now on into the future, ten-twenty years, for women coming together with women and celebrating in this kind of way.

Focus group participants who have attended and/or organized feminist seders for many years were divided about their future. Some continue to enjoy women's and feminist seders particularly because of the quality of the women's-only experience while others expressed a desire to do something new and different with the seder. Some were specifically eager to bring women's seders to a wider audience that includes men, while others worried this would dramatically change the experience for women.

After years of doing a feminist seder, a women's seder, that has been attended 99 percent by women, I'd like to see us do the feminist seder for the whole congregation, so that we start educating the whole congregation to this new way of expressing ourselves.

This is maybe our eighth year of doing a women's seder. We keep trying to shake things up a little and do things a little differently.... Men have never been excluded purposely. We've never said, "you can't come." But [proactively including men] would change the whole dynamic of the evening as being an evening of women's spirituality and women's sharing and women's discussions. So it's a trade-off.

Some expressed their belief in a need to balance meeting women's individual needs and being catalysts for communal change.

While I think it's important for me as an individual – and I think I could make the generalization for most Jewish women– to have women-only experiences. . . if we're going to be catalysts for change, we have to include men in the process. We have to educate boys and men. . . . I would love for men to be educated about the history and rituals and values and concepts in [the Ma'yan] Haggadah. I think it might help change the world, if men got the same kind of education about women that women get.

5.4.8.1.1 The Ma'yan Seder and Haggadah

Given that the seder and *haggadah* are among the best known of Ma'yan's programs and products, it is not surprising this was one arena in which focus group participants offered specific feedback about their experiences with Ma'yan.

I got the Ma'yan Haggadah and I had a women's seder in my house. I prepared and prepared. I'm not sure where it came from. I had never done anything like that before. And I loved every minute of it! It was so fabulous!

I used the Haggadah this year. I think it's a wonderfully coherent piece and it surpasses so many of the haggadot that we do use at our seders which are more traditional than the Ma'yan Haggadah.

One focus group participant whose experience of the Ma'yan Seder has changed over the years, suggested that it is time for Ma'yan to take its seders to the next step.

I've been to two Ma'yan seders. One was at the beginning... Then I went to one again this year. I had two different experiences altogether. The first one I went to was, "Oh, my God! There are so many wonderful ways of thinking about women in the Exodus story and the music and all that." ... I don't know to what extent it changed my seders at home. I think it did. Somebody gave me a Miriam's Cup. But this year, when I went to the Ma'yan Seder, I didn't have to learn anything that I didn't already know. I've been exposed to all these things for quite some time. What made me feel good at the Ma'yan Seder this year was that I was celebrating with other women. We were singing and dancing and singing about Jewish women in history. It wasn't that it was going to change my seder at home... those changes have already been made... [But] That's the piece of it that I have the feeling you could run with more. It's not just enough to bring women together... the experience I had this year at the seder was incidental perhaps to your philosophy.

These responses to the experiences of women's and feminist seders in general, and to the Ma'yan Seder and haggadah more specifically, suggest both the continued interest in such programs and materials and the sense among many that the time has come for further change. Many focus group participants are particularly interested in further exploring the possibility of mainstreaming feminist experiences or sharing them with men. Others simply feel ready for something new, but are unsure what that new thing should be.

5.4.8.2 *Rosh Chodesh*

- 53% of respondents said they had participated in a *Rosh Chodesh* group.
- 46% said they would be interested in participating in a *Rosh Chodesh* group.
- Less than 1% were currently involved with a *Rosh Chodesh* group.

That only half of focus group participants had participated in a *Rosh Chodesh* group and some who hadn't participated wanted to do so, suggests that *Rosh Chodesh* groups are not as widespread or easy to find as they should be. Those who spoke about their experiences in a *Rosh Chodesh* group said they enjoyed the way it gave them time for themselves and time to connect with other Jewish women.

Our Temple for a number of years has been having a Rosh Hodesh ritual. I participated in it. It was very uplifting, because it was all women.

Some women also saw *Rosh Chodesh* groups as a good place to learn and teach about women and women's issues. Others shared the difficulty of organizing and sustaining groups.

5.4.9 *Mikveh*

Several women derive meaning and a feeling of belonging from their participation in traditional rituals like *mikveh*. Some who use *mikveh* regularly described it as a central component of their religious life that fosters a sense of connection among Jewish women and links them to past generations of women. Some women spoke of using *mikveh* in a traditional framework. Others shared ways they had used or would like to use *mikveh* in new rituals unrelated to observance of traditional family purity laws. Some focus group participants indicated they had faced obstacles in trying to use *mikvaot* for nontraditional purposes.

One of the experiences in rituals that's most often overlooked for Jewish women that's very inclusive is the mikveh. I would go so far as to liken it to a women's underground railroad. That's the experience I personally have had with it... The mikveh is really a place where women can connect in no other way. I've seen it cross movement boundaries. I've seen it cross sexuality boundaries...

I knew that I wanted mikveh to be part of my healing process. The options are very limited. The local mikveh is Chabad. I called them and it was clearly not an option to do anything there. They said it's only for family purity reasons. I was like, okay, do I lie?... I did end up using a mikveh in San Francisco. They were extremely cooperative and wonderful and it worked out in a really wonderful way. I don't know that it would have, had I not had the connections that I have.

These findings suggest projects like the Boston-based Mayyim Chayyim⁹⁸ community *mikveh* are meeting a need felt by some Jewish women. The extent of this need will become clearer as more community *mikvaot* open their doors and experiment with different kinds of programming.

5.4.10 *Kippot, Tallit and Tefillin*

Another sign of inclusion for many focus group participants is the growing acceptance and use of *kippot* and *tallitot* in their congregations.

I feel pretty well integrated in my life, in what I do and where I belong in the shul—the vast majority of women wear tallitot and kipot....

We're now in a synagogue where some women do, some women don't, they talk about it, there is angst about it, but it's okay whatever you decide. I like that. I think that is what

⁹⁸ Literally, living waters.

feminism is, that we can make our own choices, based on what feels right to us, and have that be respected.

Conversely, the lack of support for women wearing these ritual garments was spoken of as a signifier of exclusion.

My grandfather passed away a couple of years ago and I inherited his tefillin....He and I used to lay tefillin together, so it was a big bonding thing for the two of us. I went to talk to the rabbi about it. It was a very painful conversation. The first thing he said was that he didn't think it was appropriate...That's...a huge barrier to my feeling as if that's my spiritual home....

In general, more focus group participants seemed to be comfortable with *kippot* and *tallitot* than with *tefillin*, though some did indicate they enjoy praying regularly with *tefillin* and believe they are obligated to do so. Resistance to *tefillin*, and for some, to all ritual objects traditionally worn by men, seemed to stem either from a lack of comfort or from uncertainty about taking on what many described as a “male” ritual objects. Women raised questions about whether the goal of Jewish feminism is for women to adopt “male” garments and make them no longer male or to adapt these practices and develop new ritual garments for women.

I'll wear a tallit and a kippah, but I don't wear tefillin. But if there's that feminist version, let me know, because I'll put it on. So that's a difference. It's not because I don't think women should wear it; it's not appealing to me.

You can choose with tallit. Your tallit is very personal. I wear kippot all the time. But it's my kippah and it's my tallit. Tefillin is so unbelievably uniform. There's nothing in my life that that's uniform. I am not able right now to do that.

One woman described how her encounter with a troubling Torah reading was actually the catalyst for her decision to wear a *tallit* and *kippah*, which she had not done before. Her tale indicates the power these ritual objects carry for some women to convey a status of equality.

I read Torah for both my younger brothers' bar mitzvahs. For the youngest brother, I was reading the section where Lot has taken in angels and he says, "You can't have my guests, but here, take my two virgin daughters." I was so upset by it... This is a disturbing text. It would be one thing if you take this text and wrestle with it, but I seem to recall the commentary on it was something kind of wimpy, like "This may seem extreme to us, but we must understand the importance of the value of hospitality to the Oriental in those days." I thought this was a completely unacceptable response that my synagogue's text is giving me: "That's too bad, but that's the breaks. Male guests, protected; female daughters, forget about it." I really felt strongly that I didn't want to give the impression that I was a second-class Jewish citizen. I felt it was very important to wear a tallit and kippah when reading this. And I wore a tallit and kippah and have done so pretty much ever since...

Participants also discussed *kippot*, *tallit*, and *tefillin* as customs for which congregations and

Jewish schools often do not have uniform policies for males and females. Alternatively, congregations may have policies which focus group participants find problematic.

I was just thinking of my synagogue, in the last two years, if you go up for an aliyah, you need to wear a tallis. There are women who won't go because they don't want to wear it. I'm not sure that's the best approach to say "You need to do this." I think what might be helpful is to educate women about wearing tallitot, or kippot, or whatever it is, about participating in ritual, so that they can make choices based on knowledge and not based on "I didn't grow up doing that" or "I'm not comfortable having someone force me to do something." So I think that would be very helpful.

The men who said, "You can't wear this and do any of these things," now say, "You could do these things if you put on my clothes" I'm not going to do it. I have to do it a woman's way, whatever that is. I haven't figured out yet what it is. But I would like to work with some people who would like to help me figure out what this is. And not an apron, please.

The wearing of *kippot* by women and girls is not normative in many communities where wearing of *kippot* is normative for men and boys. Many egalitarian day schools and synagogues require boys and male teachers to wear *kippot* but not girls or women teachers. This is thus an area in which differential gender expectations persist.

If there's a boy up there without a kippah, they'll stick it on the boy's head. But the girls come to say Aleinu or whatever they do, and they don't wear a kippah. . . . I've written a letter to the rabbi and cantor and president of the synagogue. If we're saying that boys and girls are equal. . . why is our leadership, who happen to be men. . . saying it's okay?

My kids are at a Reform day school. . . . There's a lot of resistance to the idea that both boys and girls are going to wear kippot. I think that what you model and what you start doing when you're little is very important in how you assume your membership in the community.

Role models and generational issues also have an impact on the adoption of these ritual objects by younger women. While some mothers reported their daughters experience getting a *tallit* as a "very natural rite of passage," others report young girls feel it is not "cool" to wear a *tallit*, though boys their age do not appear to feel that way.

I have a thirteen-year-old daughter, whose tallit she helped design and she tied the knots. It sits in the closet at the shul. She's not going to put it on. And her tefillin that I taught her to lay sits in my drawer. Maybe one day. I'm a hard Mom to follow... I understand, but I hold responsible my community that has not made it safe for my daughter to take these things that we worked so hard to win, that are hers. She can have them. She's a Conservative Jew. And there's no support for her.

As the above quote suggests, the individual decision about whether or not to wear *kippah*, *tallit* or *tefillin* is made in the context of communal norms and expectations. Individual teachers, parents

and rabbis can influence such decisions but focus group participants also made clear that educational materials and programs could be helpful in moving their schools and congregations to initiate more systemic cultural change around these issues.

5.5 Denominational Findings

While Ma'yan did not seek information about the specific experiences of women affiliated with each of the major denominations of American Jewish life, focus group discussions revealed some trends among women of different denominations. These findings might be used to help identify specific challenges and possibilities for collaboration with various denominational organizations, rabbinical bodies, educational institutions and synagogues.

5.5.1 Reform Women

One hundred and twenty-two women (33%) identifying as Reform participated in the focus groups. Of these 77% identified as feminists. On the whole, these women indicated the Reform movement has been very successful at fully integrating egalitarianism into its ritual and communal life. Indeed, most women who are involved in Reform congregations now take egalitarianism for granted. For some, this means they have not thought a lot about feminism in a Jewish context.

I've never thought about feminism, because I've always felt my path was a normal path, a normal journey. I grew up as a Reform Jew. I never felt there were doors closed to me as a woman.

Certainly being a member of this [Reform] congregation, which I think totally supports women and I think [the rabbi] has brought a lot of us along our journey, to read Torah and to wear tallit, which I guess women did not do at one point here. It never has felt forced, so I have never felt any clash or questioning of where I am as a Jewish woman. We're starting to see young women applying for admission [to rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College] who say they grew up in congregations with female rabbis, so that... it never dawned on them that they couldn't be a rabbi.

Other focus group participants, many of whom were old enough to remember pre-egalitarian synagogue life, specifically indicated they had chosen affiliation with Reform because of its non-sexist ideology and because of the numerous women leaders who serve as role models within the movement.

When I found out about Reform – at that time I really knew nothing about it – it opened up a whole new world for us, because we could participate. We wanted to. We were people who wanted to come more often than once a year, but there was nothing for us, nothing for the women in my family.

5.5.2 Conservative Women

Tremendous change around women's participation in synagogue life has occurred within the Conservative movement over the last decades. Most of the 141 Conservative-identified

focus group participants (38%) experienced these changes as significantly impacting them, often in very personal ways.

Belonging to an egalitarian synagogue, when I went to say kaddish twice a day for the thirty days, to be counted in the minyan was an incredible experience for me. So the change, certainly in the Conservative movement, has made me, I suppose, a much better Jew, in a way, because I feel that I am an equal participant.

I feel really comfortable in a Conservative synagogue as a Jewish feminist.

While many speak of these changes with excitement and pride, many were also quick to share memories of the past in voices heavy with the emotion evoked by years of exclusion.

I grew up in a... religious home and went to Camp Ramah. I felt very left out as a girl, so much so that I left the religion, but I feel very much a cultural Jew. There were things that I loved about camp. I loved the singing and the sense of community... We would have Shabbat in front of this lake. It was beautiful. But I was definitely excluded as a girl. We were not allowed to participate in many ways. So it's very difficult for me. I don't go to synagogues.

I grew up in a traditional Conservative synagogue that my family calls Conservadox, where women don't read Torah. . . . I loved my synagogue until I got to the point where I realized there wasn't really a role for me, as I was growing older, to become a leader and to participate to the fullest extent. Then I hated my synagogue and I have ever since.

Some related it took them time to adjust to egalitarianism, which they initially experienced as strange and even wrong.

We went to a traditional synagogue here... I fought and kicked and screamed and finally got used to it. Then, all of a sudden, the doors opened up. It took a couple of years just to get used to the egalitarian; not that it was offensive, I just wasn't brought up in it.

In Canada, there were no female Conservative rabbis. I'd show up here [in the United States] at a Conservative shul and there's a female rabbi. Obviously, I felt uncomfortable; not obviously, but I did feel uncomfortable, because it wasn't what I was used to.

Many Conservative focus group participants, though not all, eventually grew comfortable with changes. Others feel a sense of alienation from a movement they considered to have been too slow and not fully committed to egalitarianism.

I had the expectation that Conservative synagogues would be egalitarian, so I was surprised to find the ten to twenty percent that aren't. Oh, right! This is still happening somewhere.

[I was] president of this Conservative synagogue, where I could pay the rent but couldn't have an aliyah. . . . I would exercise as much power as I could. But when it really came down to it, in a synagogue where you don't have equal rights, you come up

against the rabbi. . . . No matter how much you wield the authority, you're not getting past his ritual blocks.

Others, particularly those committed to the movement's understanding of *halakha*, continue to find it a very good home. Some expressed the desire for more clarity from the movement about its policies and recommended practices.

I think that the Conservative movement needs a lot more clarity about a lot of things, but specifically about what egalitarianism means. I'm talking about specific things. If a woman is going to read from the Torah, is she going to wear a tallit? Does she have to wear a tallit? Does she have to wear a kippah? If she's going to wear a kippah, does she have to wear a tallit? I know this is nitty-gritty, but these are things that I think about all the time.

The Jewish Theological Seminary also stood out as a place in which female students in the undergraduate, graduate and rabbinic programs feel there is significant room for positive change to create a welcoming and integrated educational environment for women. There is a sense male culture dominates, sexism persists among faculty and administration, and these factors negatively impact the experiences of students.

At JTS, where. . . everything was theoretically egalitarian, it felt so not egalitarian to me.

We now have 150 women members of the Rabbinical Assembly, which is probably about 10 percent. But that shift has not shifted the culture of the Seminary. I think that's why the women students still. . . don't feel legitimated, because they don't find it part of the culture of the institution.

5.5.3 Orthodox Women⁹⁹

Just under 10% of focus group participants (31) identified as Orthodox, traditional or observant. While this percentage is consistent with recent findings that 10% of American Jews consider themselves to be Orthodox, it is also somewhat under-representative as a sample given that 21% of households belonging to synagogues are Orthodox (NJPS 2000-1). Furthermore, the Orthodox women who participated in focus groups were, to a large extent, unrepresentative of the spectrum of Orthodox life since 75% identified strongly as feminists.

Orthodox focus group participants fell into two categories. Some were feminist activists who spoke of achieving significant changes in the realms of women's education and women's visibility as scholars in their communities. They emphasized the frustration of "finding" halakhic solutions to exclusion, only to be told "society" will not (yet) allow the changes. They shared stories of trying to

⁹⁹ For previous studies of Orthodox women, newly Orthodox women, and Orthodoxy and feminism, see: Fishman, Sylvia Barack (2000). *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Life*. New York: American Jewish Committee; Davidman, Lynn (1991). *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Kaufman, Renee Debra (1991). *Rachel's Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

make their lifecycle events more egalitarian, again within the boundaries of *halakha*, and sometimes being thwarted by rabbis.

The things that bother me the most are not even the halakhic issues; they're the issues that come down to having a certain level of respect, or expectation of a woman. When you give a shi'ur, people are so astounded. Wow! How can a woman have such knowledge?... I've had such horrible things happen in my community. I've been told I have to say "Amen" more quietly, because I'm saying "Amen" too loudly. I've had fights over carrying the Torah at Simchas Torah. Such fights, like you've never seen before.

A few indicated their own frustration with not being able to claim the title rabbi despite their significant learning.

Yes. I want to be a rabbi and I can't. That makes me angry... I think there are very few issues barring a woman halakhically from being a rabbi, because what is your definition of "rabbi?" The definition of rabbi is having your spiritual leader, having the person who teaches you. There are women who are fully capable and do these activities all the time... Okay, so you can't give testimony. You would be able to officiate at a wedding... There are definite limitations. [But] the way we have been doing so many roles is so close to what we call rabbi. There are women who are educated in the very same things that men get s'micha for. Yet we can't take that radical step. That angers me.

Other Orthodox focus group participants who did not identify with Orthodox feminism spoke of experiencing the value of the special roles of women in traditional Judaism – particularly as they relate to a strong women's community. This was reflected in discussions of *mikveh*, of the community behind the *mechitza*, and of women's power within the family. As has been previously found in a more extensive study of Orthodox women, younger Orthodox women seemed less likely than Orthodox women over forty to identify with feminism.¹⁰⁰

I guess I was taught that women bring in Shabbos, which is our second holiest day of the year. We bring that in; men don't do that. We have this power that I believe, that may not be expressed all the time, but that is real. It doesn't mean that I need to go up to the bimah to do it.

One issue which remains a top priority for Orthodox feminists and was not even raised by women of other denominations was *agunot*.

One of the students said to me, "If you could change the laws of agunah, but you'd have to give up on everything else—basically on women being rabbis—would you do it?" I said yes. I won't be happy about it and I think it's a ridiculous choice and I think all those things affect each other, but the one issue that just cries out, because of the injustice, is definitely the agunah issue. I don't think anything comes remotely close. But I have many other things that need to change.

¹⁰⁰ Fishman (2000), 58.

Women of other denominations often discussed Orthodoxy as a powerful symbol and remnant of sexism in the Jewish world. It is often easier for women of other denominations to situate, recognize and discuss women's exclusion, inequality or lack of full integration in Orthodoxy than in their own liberal communities. Others who expressed great admiration for Orthodox women believe that feminism is about choice in the religious sphere as well. Still others indicated they do not understand Orthodox women and the choices they make and would welcome learning from them about their lives.

5.5.4 *Jewish Renewal and Reconstructionism*

Focus group participants who were members of Reconstructionist and Jewish Renewal communities had very positive things to say about the egalitarianism and the prayer experience of their communities. These women place great value on these religious movements' sustained and ongoing commitment to women's inclusion.

I'm really clear that I would not have Judaism as my spiritual practice if I did not have Jewish Renewal to go to. . . . I'm Renewal, it feels really clear, just because of the inherent egalitarianism that's been built into it as they've developed it over the years.

I don't think it's a coincidence that our entire movement [Reconstructionism] does liturgical change. There's an egalitarian consciousness that pervades every part of our communal life.

5.5.5 *Denominationalism*

Some focus group participants indicated dissatisfaction with the entire denominational structure of religious life. They described a vision of a future Jewish community marked by less separation between the movements.

I'd like to see less emphasis on the separations and more emphasis on what we all need to learn and what we need to share and the opportunities for all of us. I think we create lots of artificial boundaries between us. My vision for the future would be that we focus much less on denominationalism.

Some young people also explained finding a movement to identify with can be difficult.

I've been talking with a lot of Jewish friends about this lately. A lot of us in our twenties are finding it difficult to choose a movement right now.

Many expressed the hope that Jewish women might be the ones to link Jews across denominational lines. They also felt women might achieve more if they did succeed in working across denominational lines.

I do think that women will be able to maybe bridge some of the gaps we're seeing between progressive Jews and traditional Jews.

If the different sections of the Jewish community remain isolated in and of themselves, I think that's a hindrance to moving forward on the gender issue.

5.6. Religious Change As A Process

While many focus group participants no longer practice Judaism the same way they did while growing up, many indicated that their comfort with various Jewish practices is related to the experiences of their youth. Some women who were raised in non-egalitarian settings described their continuing discomfort in egalitarian settings. Some described their first experiences with taking on new religious roles as jarring. And some who grew up in egalitarian synagogues used similar language to describe their shock and dismay at first discovering traditional Judaism.

I think the first time I was called up to have an aliya was a culture shock in my life. Whoever imagined it?

I didn't know anything about not being able to do those things until I went to Israel, my junior year in college. I had never been to a synagogue where women weren't allowed on the bimah, or been cognizant of it. . . until I was on the campus of Hebrew University and I was up in that balcony. I was like, "I'm never coming back here again!"

Exposure to different ways of practicing Judaism, preferably at an early age, increases women's religious options. Women value the ability to make choices. From an array of possibilities, they weave a personally rich and meaningful Jewish life. Choice in religious life is more possible today than perhaps ever before in Jewish history. Focus group participants were clear about the need to protect these choices, continue expanding their possibilities, and extend and replicate the successes of feminism in the religious realm into the other realms of Jewish life.

5.7 Conclusion

While Ma'yan's first ten years of programming and organizational activity have consistently demonstrated a commitment to change in the ritual arena, the organization has also consistently interrogated the relationship between meeting women's personal spiritual needs and creating communal change. Through its Seder and other programs, Ma'yan has worked hard to forge links among political, spiritual, and communal change. Ma'yan has come to appreciate the importance of spiritual sustenance in movements for social change, but it has also begun to openly question why Jewish feminism has been more successful in making change in the religious realm than in the Jewish communal realm, and what responsibility it has to address this divided reality. These issues, combined with an assessment of the changing landscape of Jewish feminist and Jewish religious organizations, and a sustained analysis of the data it has gathered, have led Ma'yan to consider a realignment of its priorities for change during its next ten years.

6. JEWISH EDUCATION

- Jewish women and girls enjoy unprecedented access to Jewish education.
- Women still want more education about Jewish women for themselves and their children, and they also want Jewish education to include gender analyses of Jewish text, culture, and history.
- Many women believe that they must acquire Jewish knowledge and ritual skills in order to become credible as leaders.
- Jewish feminist educators, while they celebrated new feminist possibilities in the classroom, reported a sense of isolation and expressed a desire to network with one another.

6.1 Introduction

Women's and girls' access to Jewish education has increased tremendously over the past 40 years. More Jewish women and girls have greater Jewish educational opportunities than at any other time in Jewish history. Women from all denominations are studying, and in some cases becoming recognized scholars of Torah, Talmud and other Jewish texts. Coeducation settings are the norm in non-Orthodox and some Orthodox schools. Committed Jews of all denominations increasingly see Jewish learning as a life-long pursuit. More than a million Jews now study Jewish texts regularly,¹⁰¹ and women participate more frequently and extensively than men in adult Jewish education programs.¹⁰² Participation in Jewish day schools, yeshivas and Jewish studies college courses has become the most common type of Jewish schooling for the Jewishly-engaged population.¹⁰³ Girls now participate in formal Jewish education in the years between *bar/bat mitzvah* and college more than do boys.¹⁰⁴

When one examines Jewish education by gender, age and denomination, it appears the gender gap is closing. Men and women aged 18-34 have practically identical rates of participation in Jewish schools as children and teenagers, although women currently between the ages of 35 and 64 received far less Jewish education than their male counterparts.¹⁰⁵ It appears that from the 1970s onward, parents have not differentiated their decisions about Jewish education for sons and daughters.¹⁰⁶ If this trend continues, the current generation of women over 35 could be the

¹⁰¹Wertheimer, Jack (1999). "Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues," *American Jewish Year Book*, 99 (New York: American Jewish Committee), 3-115.

¹⁰²Cohen, Steven M. and Davidson, Aryeh (2001). *Adult Jewish Learning in America: Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth*. New York: Florence G. Heller/JCCA Research Center.

¹⁰³United Jewish Communities (2003).

¹⁰⁴Jewish girls participate in formal Jewish education more than boys do in every grade from 7-12, except grade 9. See Kadushin, Charles, Kelner, Shaul, and Saxe, Leonard (2000). *Being a Jewish Teenager in America: Trying to Make it*. Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University.

¹⁰⁵According to the 1990 NJPS: 49% of Conservative men aged 18-24 and 42% of Jewish women of the same age and 14% of Reform women and 29% of Reform men of the same age cohort reported that they had received a "substantial" Jewish education. Fishman, Sylvia Barack and Goldstein, Alice. *When They Are Older They Will Not Depart: Jewish Education and Jewish Behavior of American Adults*. Cited in Fishman, Sylvia Barack (1993). *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community*. New York: The Free Press.

¹⁰⁶Cohen, Steven M. (2004) *Jewish Educational Background: Trends and Variations Among Today's Jewish Adults*. Jerusalem: United Jewish Communities Report Series on the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001, 5, 17.

last, outside of the ultra-Orthodox world, to experience lack of Jewish education as a form of gender discrimination.

If the issue of equal access to Jewish education is indeed being resolved, the next set of challenges in the field of gender and Jewish education will be to assess curricula, teacher training, and practices within the classroom. The nature of Jewish education that boys and girls (and men and women) receive, and its inclusion or exclusion of gender analysis and women's history, are crucial. Also critical are issues of role modeling, the language teachers use, and the ways in which gender stereotypes still operate in the classroom.

The lack of feminist content in Jewish educational programs, for both youth and adults, has attracted some discussion and study, but not sufficient systematic research.¹⁰⁷ General research in gender and education has demonstrated the value of training teachers to be aware of gender assumptions in the classroom, and using innovative curricula that speak to the experiences of male and female students.¹⁰⁸ However, the prevalence of women as low paid and under-trained supplementary-school instructors is an ongoing issue.¹⁰⁹

6.1.1 *Ma'yan and Jewish Education*

Sometime ago, when Ma'yan made some forays into issues of gender and Jewish education, those efforts met with resistance that indicated this would not be an easy path to pursue. Jewish educators repeatedly informed us there are many other priorities in the field of Jewish education, and issues of gender were not top priorities for most educators.

Nonetheless, when Ma'yan has held programs for educators, such as a Ma'yan Seder designed specifically in cooperation with the Melton Teacher Training Program, or joint projects with the Jewish Women's Archive on community education around Women's History, many individual teachers expressed a passion for incorporating more feminism and more knowledge about Jewish women into their work. Furthermore, through the Jewish Feminist Research Group, Ma'yan has nurtured Jewish feminist scholarship and provided a supportive environment for Jewish feminist thinkers and academics in a variety of disciplines to pursue new ideas and to forge new connections, academic and personal. Ma'yan has also, in a limited way, offered support to Jewish feminist college students through its summer internships.

In the course of this research project, Ma'yan sought out focus groups with Jewish educators and academics because of a sense that work must be done to transform Jewish education from a

¹⁰⁷ Kaplan, Janna and Reinharz, Shulamit (1997). *Gender Issues in Jewish Day Schools*. Waltham, MA: Women's Studies Program [and] Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Institute for Community and Religion, Brandeis University.

¹⁰⁸ Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (1995). *How Schools Shortchange Girls: The AAUW Report: A Study of Major Findings on Girls and Education*. New York: Marlowe and Company.

¹⁰⁹ One study found that 72% of all Reform religious school teachers were women, and most were minimally paid or work as volunteers; a majority did not have advanced degrees in Jewish studies or education (Wertheimer, 1999).

gender perspective. Organizations must partner with one another to promote gender-sensitive policies and curricula. A beginning has been made by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), which recently received a grant from the Covenant Foundation to develop, implement and evaluate a gender-sensitive curriculum for Orthodox day schools. This work will serve as an important model for anyone pursuing change in this area.

6.2 *Insufficient Education on Jewish Women's History*

Jewish women want more education about women in Judaism and Jewish history, for themselves and their children.

- 66% of survey respondents agreed with the statement “I am dissatisfied with my level of knowledge about women in Judaism and Jewish history.”
- 74% of mothers surveyed are dissatisfied with their children’s education about women in Judaism and Jewish history.
- 99% of survey respondents believe studying Jewish female role models should be an integral part of Jewish education for children of all ages.

Mothers of children in Jewish day schools and supplementary schools are not satisfied with the level of gender awareness of their children’s teachers. Focus group participants spoke repeatedly of the need for teachers, on every level of Jewish education, to be better trained and educated about the history of Jewish women and about gendered analyses of Judaism. They also want teachers to be more aware of the effects of using gendered language in the classroom and more conscious of the subtle, insidious ways some teachers still listen and respond differently to male and female students.

I feel one of the areas where we're really lagging is in education. My kids are at a Conservative day school. This is a very modern, liberal day school, but I feel that our teachers have not gotten the kind of sensitivity training. . . to teach about women in the Bible, about women's contributions. If they're studying three Jewish leaders, they're all men.

Women's issues and the story of what women have done in history – that's completely neglected in our Sunday schools.

Curricula which incorporates materials about Jewish women and is informed by a feminist analysis is not uniformly available, even in schools where it would be welcomed by teachers and parents. In the area of curricular materials, focus group participants shared a range of experience. Some teachers felt that their classrooms were fully equipped with gender-sensitive materials, while others complained that they only had outdated books replete with gender stereotypes. Some teachers spoke of having to seek out visual materials that challenged stereotypes and presented new images as normative.

I feel the education hasn't changed to reflect the incorporation of feminist values. It's really no different from what I grew up with in a Conservative congregation in New Jersey in the '60s.

There is nothing that is overtly sexist, but there isn't a sense of a rich, diverse curriculum that's developed.

In discussing ways to address this lack of knowledge about women in Judaism and Jewish history, focus group participants made clear they are interested in integrated curricula that would not be marginalized and would be taught to boys and girls as well as men and women. Some also clearly indicated what they are seeking is a feminist-informed curricula, not just more information about Jewish women.

It's more than celebrating Miriam and Ruth, even though they're very important. . . . It's inclusionary and I think it's important, but I also want a feminist analysis.

A college student majoring in Jewish women's studies envisioned a future in which there would be "no need" for such a major.

I want to talk about education. I think it really goes to the issue of leadership. I would like there to be no need for a major that's called Jewish women's studies. It should be included in regular Jewish studies. Even from a young age in elementary school, there should be a focus [on women].

An administrator of a day school system indicated this vision of integration is not yet a reality. She described the situation at her school: material for Women's History Month was taught in the library at lunchtime once a year as an extra credit opportunity, but was not yet incorporated into the course of study for students throughout the year. A professor of Jewish studies voiced a similar concern that feminism is not utilized to inform all Jewish teaching and learning.

I have a concern that feminist methodologies and approaches remain their own thing and don't really get well integrated into different areas of Jewish studies. It becomes one subject among many. If it's difficult for the people who teach it and study it [and to integrate feminism into their subject area], how much more so will it be difficult for the students to really integrate it and really see it has applications to all different areas. So that's an area that I think still needs attention.

Younger women who had attended Jewish schools suggested that content about women in Judaism has made its way into some curricula or individual school programs but not others.

I went to a Reform day school when I was younger and we learned about Jewish women. I think that's where it should be, in the elementary education, or in Hebrew school. It's not something that you have to go back and learn later.

Even though I was educated in the Jewish day school system, I really have no clue about women in Judaism.

For students at all levels to be exposed to the insights of feminist scholarship, teachers need to know more of this material. One participant, a long-time attendee of CAJE¹¹⁰ conferences, suggested there is far less material on gender issues at conferences today than in the early '80s. This inattention to gender issues, she believed, was not due to the absence of need for such sessions, but rather to the current historical moment. In her words, "There was a pretty active movement from the '60s through the '80s. I feel it was accepted and is now forgotten."

6.2.1 Need for Curricula on Sexuality and Body Image

Focus group participants wanted more educational materials and training about: body image, eating disorders, dress, and sexuality from a Jewish perspective. These issues are present in every Jewish day school, youth group, and synagogue, and focus group participants indicated that a creative Jewish feminist approach to them would be welcomed by feminist teachers, parents and administrators.

6.3 High Value of Adult Jewish Education

Focus group participants who grew up without equal access to Jewish education believe Jewish education and the acquisition of synagogue skills are key to their success as competent and confident leaders in their communities. Some suggested that, without a more complete Jewish education, they are not in a position to advocate for change. For some, a lack of facility with Hebrew and/or Jewish textual skills poses an obstacle to attaining full self-confidence as leaders, particularly in synagogue and educational realms, but in other areas as well. Whether or not men in similar positions of leadership actually have the knowledge women identify as crucial is, for these women, not the issue. These women believe a lack of knowledge is an obstacle preventing them from taking on more advocacy roles.

All the things I believe from feminism outside of my Jewish life, I believe in Judaism, but I'm perhaps more reticent to act communally without some of the learning. . . which I think gives you almost a right to your feminism in Judaism.

If you don't have any of the education behind you. . . it's just so hard to feel as credible.

Because I was so active in feminism in other areas of my life, I felt here I need to do this learning first. I still feel that about myself and Judaism. Before I can be really active, I need to learn, and I need to be able to speak from that position of knowledge.

Since the advent of Jewish feminism, women have expressed reticence to assume leadership or to challenge sexist practices without sufficient Jewish education. Indeed, this sense of the need

¹¹⁰ Coaliton for the Advancement of Jewish Education.

for more education has been blamed by some as one of the obstacles to women's power to make change in the Jewish community.¹¹¹

Many women believe that Jewish knowledge is necessary for their success in assuming real leadership, and many invest time in educating themselves Jewishly. Once they do so, they often quickly achieve a sense of validity, strength and even power.

I think the level of insight and energy that feminist Jews I know put into the process of becoming an informed Jew once there's a path for them to be on, once there's a community for them to be in, it's just so extraordinary that very quickly you feel validated and you feel very strong when you come into community with others, if you have those resources, if you have that power. But I think we need the education to be able to do it.

6.4 Lack of Gender Awareness in Adult Education

Many focus group participants have found satisfying and engaging outlets for their Jewish intellectual and spiritual needs in adult education settings, particularly in synagogue Torah study and in courses such as those offered by the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School. Yet, many also suggested the feminist content and approach of these courses could be enhanced and this would improve the content and experiences of such classes for women as well as for men. Focus group participants indicated their rabbis and other adult education teachers often do not provide their students with a feminist approach or with feminist-informed content.

We study Torah, a very old book, mostly about men. In this congregation, I certainly have not seen any modern thought brought into the Torah study, for example. There is plenty of Jewish feminist literature, I am sure, but you wouldn't know it, if you belonged to this congregation.

Some of us just finished a two-year course in the Florence Melton School. What I was really struck with in that course was that not only did it have very few women's stories in it, but it was also structurally based so much on male, rabbinic, text-based kind of learning. . . . [T]here's room for paying attention to some of the other modes of learning.

Some focus group participants reported teachers and students of adult education routinely respond in markedly different ways to men and women.

I've noticed, in the classes that I take. . . men seem to have this permission to expound that women don't. You get the crossed arms and the looking at the ceiling that men don't get.

¹¹¹ This critique of Jewish feminism has been most sharply developed by Aviva Cantor. See Cantor, Aviva (1995). *Jewish Women Jewish Men: The Legacy of Patriarchy in Jewish Life*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

This is, in many ways, an incredibly amazing congregation and an incredibly inclusive congregation. It has allowed me to bring together Jewishness and feminism. But even in this congregation... there is a sense of male entitlement at various moments... [such as] Torah study... So in terms of thinking about what needs to be done, in terms of educating clergy, there needs to be a sense of feminist facilitation and making sure that certain voices don't become dominant or squash other voices.

Others reported they have encountered resistance by teachers and fellow students to discussing the challenges that arise when one studies Torah and the Jewish past through the lens of gender.

I sat in this very room. . . Erev Shavuot, for our study session. There's the rabbi and there's our scholar. We begin with the people standing at Mt. Sinai. But the text says very clearly that the people are the men. I said, "And there we have it." Everybody, including the women, backed totally away, like I had dropped something dirty in the middle of the floor, and just went right on. Nobody, even in our egalitarian congregation, wants to deal with that.

When women teachers approach Judaism from a different perspective than many of their male colleagues, other questions arise about the relative merits of traditional vs. alternative methodologies.

It's not uncommon to look at a program and see that the men are teaching the hard-core text classes and the women are teaching things that are more interdisciplinary, or more creative, or more interpersonal. I think there is a real devaluing of that, by women as well. . . . Whether we want to go on a separate track or not is an age-old question in feminism, but I think it's very alive and thriving in the Jewish community.

Those interested in adult Jewish education should consider undertaking a systematic evaluation of gender issues in existing adult Jewish education programs, particularly those that have been replicated across the country. The training of teachers on issues of gender awareness in the classroom should also be encouraged.

6.5 Lack of Network of Jewish Feminist Educators

There are pockets of creative and innovative Jewish feminist education throughout the country, but no mechanism exists for interaction or sharing among educators, each of whom sees herself as something of an exception. Some focus group participants who were involved in Jewish education as Hebrew school and day school teachers or administrators or as adult educators shared innovative approaches and experiences they have employed in their own classrooms. Many of these women saw their roles as educators as ideal vehicles for communicating their passion about both Judaism and Jewish feminism.

I feel my role as a Jewish feminist most strongly as an educator. . . . I feel I have a particular role to play as an educator, bringing that sense of "yes, you can do this, and this is what women are doing."

Teachers described writing their own creative curricula, challenging students to wrestle with the assumptions of prayers like “*shelo asani ishah/who has not made me a woman*” and teaching about women’s history. Many described themselves as exceptions and raised questions about how much impact they can have on education if they remain isolated.

In the Jewish day schools where I teach, I’m the only woman who wears a kippah. I teach Judaica and Hebrew studies. Almost all the teachers are women. I’m the only woman who is concerned about gender-specific language and how that impinges upon education.

I teach prayer. I am always trying to teach it gender-neutral. They don’t buy it, just because it’s not reinforced.

An important service that would address the lack of networking among feminist educators would be the creation of a clearinghouse, actual or virtual, that would collect and disseminate materials. Another possibility would be a network that would convene feminist Jewish educators or at least bring them into dialogue with one another on the web.

6.6 Higher Education: Slow Incremental Change

In Ma’yan’s focus group with Jewish women academics, some participants expressed cautious hope their departments and/or Jewish educational institutions have begun to show some signs of change. Others expressed frustration with the slowness of progress, continued tokenism, and lack of gender awareness, and with what they perceive to be some students’ conservatism.

I think my institution has been really trying... to make itself aware [of gender issues]. I don’t think it knows its rear end from its elbow about how to go about doing it, but I think they’re really talking about it, which they never did before. So to me this is a major change.

I would say that the men in my department in Jewish studies are "educable." It has come to the point where they will, sometimes clumsily—it’s amusing to watch them, try to say "he or she or they"—they’ve learned that they have to be careful. What they think in their heart of hearts, on some level, I don’t care. But the culture of that department has changed a lot in the six years I’ve been there. I might get a certain amount of credit for that.

These stories of small incremental success were balanced with stories of participants for whom tenure was seriously threatened because of their gender, and stories of female students who repeatedly tell their female faculty they are not being heard by male professors.

I’m there today, tenured. But that was very unpleasant. What can I say? I did have a lot of broad-based support out there in the Jewish community.... I don’t know if this is necessary for women today, but if you go out there and have an independent power base, then you can succeed in areas where you might not have succeeded otherwise.

My undergraduate students [keep telling me]: “The [male] teachers aren’t talking to me.” For an undergraduate woman to say that is very hard. “I don’t feel like they’re hearing me. I

ask questions and they're not questions to them." These are students who are in the school now... the teacher in the classroom has to be able to hear the students. If the male professors aren't hearing the questions of the female students, that's a problem.

A professor at a Jewish institution of higher learning described how she is sometimes brought into other classes to "do feminism." While this is better than not being invited as a guest teacher, she recognized her male colleagues invite her rather than themselves taking on the commitment to incorporate feminist critical approaches into their work and teaching.

I said, "I'll be delighted to give people bibliography, talk about some of the concepts, work through some of the questions we ask, but I think other people in the department ought to be incorporating some of these women in their bibliographies and some of these questions for their students." I was told by the department chair, "I don't do feminism." I was told by other non-department members in this semi-public forum, "We're having a hard enough time finding time to cover the subjects that we cover. We don't have to do this." I'm thinking, the institution is trying desperately, it says, to change its culture and to make real strides. If the actual core group that is sitting in the classroom with the same students I have, in different departments, is going to do their own thing, and I'm going to do the feminist thing, we're ghettoized. We're absolutely ghettoized and it's not going to change.

Focus group participants who were academics were divided about the best way to approach male colleagues who exhibit sexist behavior. One suggested there is no way to change older professors and placed her hope in the future.

A lot of them are going to retire. Maybe we don't start with them. Maybe we start with who we hire.

Another suggested that some change is possible. She shared the reaction of a male colleague to whom she had pointed out some egregious behavior.

The person to whom I directed this turned beet-red. I said, "I really didn't mean to embarrass you in public." His reaction was, "If you didn't embarrass me in public, I'd never learn."

Tokenism is also a big issue for academics. Female scholars are still asked to speak as the only women on otherwise all-male panels, and sexism persists in academic hiring procedures. Faculties unwilling to hire women for top positions will nonetheless interview at least one so that they can shield themselves from accusations of chauvinism.

I can't tell you the number of places where I've applied, where I've been the token woman. I get into the interview and, dammit! I did it again. Why did I let myself get suckered into this? It'll look good on their reports that they've got one woman they interviewed.

As one focus group participant said, there are important roles that a supportive external community can play in the lives of Jewish women academics. Creating more awareness in the general community of the issues faced by Jewish women scholars and academics and of the importance of communal support for feminists in the Jewish academy could be an important beginning.

6.7 Conclusion

Women in this study demonstrated a high commitment to Jewish education at all levels. Yet focus group participants desired change in two areas: content and process. They wanted educators to infuse the content of Jewish formal and informal education with the experience of women and girls; that is, they wanted themselves and their children to learn about the lives, experiences, and histories of Jewish women in the same way that they learned about Jewish men. Many women also expected educators to take into account feminist processes: to recognize the invisibility of women in Jewish sacred text and history, to be aware of and correct subtle gender biases that appear in the classroom, and to respect the critiques of women.

In order to implement these changes, students and parents of students must hold Jewish educators and their institutions accountable for failing to include women's content and feminist process in their classrooms. Institutions themselves must also commit to incorporating women not only as learners and teachers but as contributors to the content and process of Jewish education. It is of crucial importance that networks of communication and banks of programs exist so that Jewish educators who desire to reverse gender biases have ample means to do so.

7. CONCLUSION

The findings in this report are cause for both celebration and concern. Women across the country spoke with passion about their complex and diverse lives and the multiple ways they express their commitment to Jewish life. Many have made the building and maintenance of their Jewish communities central to their life's work, either as professionals or as volunteers. Others balance involvement in their synagogues, community institutions, informal peer networks and families with other priorities. Despite their recognition of the need for continued change, few have distanced themselves from the Jewish community; in fact, ninety percent of our study sample cited "community" as the reason they are involved in Jewish communal life. These were women who, with more tools and communal support, could continue to make a significant impact on their communities.

The women in our study are grateful to live in a world transformed by feminism and in a Jewish community enriched by Jewish feminism. They have become *b'not mitzvah* as adult women and as girls, they have danced together at women's seders and they have changed the language they use to refer to God, sometimes without full recognition of the historic significance of their words. When their own communities were not sufficiently welcoming or inclusive, many left, and have now joined or started institutions and synagogues where they can be full and active participants and leaders.

Despite the significant changes these women have embraced, they also recognize there is still much work to do. The relative absence of women in the top levels of Jewish communal leadership and the lack of institutionalized support for working parents denies women opportunity, deprives the community of talent, and sends young women a strong message about what they can expect if they remain in the Jewish communal profession. The persistence of gender discrimination and pay inequity in Jewish communal life is also extremely troubling. Women's lack of confidence in their own skills and knowledge, from financial know-how to ritual literacy, remains a barrier to their claiming authority and leadership. Special attention must be paid to make our community more welcoming to a diversity of Jews and Jewish familial experience. And these are just some of the changes women want to see.

The results of this study show that, far from being irrelevant, issues of gender (in)equity are far-reaching and impact every area of Jewish experience. The hundreds of women who spoke with Ma'yan were articulate in their insistence that, though they have derived inspiration and satisfaction from the positive changes in Jewish life related to women's equality, the Jewish community is still not "fully inclusive of and responsive to" the needs of Jewish women. They also pointed the way beyond "inclusion" to a vision, not yet realized, of a community in which issues of women and gender are fully integrated into communal agendas and practices. The study further reveals those committed to women's equality must look beyond women's issues and take account of the ways in which class, age, sexuality, family status and other significant factors interplay with gender to contribute to women's experiences in the Jewish community.

Though this research raises far more questions than it can answer, it provides the clear directive that, in the words of one focus group participant, "we need to keep going." In the brief span of 30 years, women have transformed Jewish life. How they and the organizations that serve them choose to continue that transformation will have a vast impact on the face of the Jewish community in the coming century.