

WOMEN IN THE ORGANIZED BRITISH JEWISH COMMUNITY

MARLENE SCHMOOL

Director, Community Research Unit, Board of Deputies of British Jews, London, United Kingdom

An organization audit of 45 secular Jewish communal, women's, and religious organizations in Great Britain found that women are underrepresented in the leadership of the general organizations, although their participation on committees and holding office have increased in recent years. Despite the growing participation of women in the labor force, membership in women's organizations has been maintained over the last decade, but as a result of the aging of the community. Younger and unaffiliated women are still volunteering, but in single-issue Jewish groups and in non-Jewish organizations.

Until two years ago Jewish women had been almost totally neglected as a systematic area of social study within either the British Jewish community or the British population. This situation existed despite the growing body of women's studies for Britain and, more specifically, for and about Jewish women in the United States. The state of affairs began to be repaired with the publication in June 1994 of two reports under the generic title, *Women in the Jewish Community* (Goodkin & Citron, 1994; Schmool & Miller, 1994).

These studies were the first outcome of the Review of Women in the Community, which was initiated in September 1992 by Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks. The Review was a one-time project under the auspices of the (Orthodox) Chief Rabbi and was organized as five task forces: education, synagogue and religious matters, social issues, the family, and *get* (the halachic divorce process). The Review covered women's attitudes toward and experience within the British Jewish community on these topics using both qualitative and quantitative research. Meetings were held throughout Britain for some 18 months from September 1992 to February 1994 at which women of all religious persuasions expressed their points of view, at the same time women submitted life histories and problems in writing. To give a statistical framework to this material, over 2000

women were sampled on communal and social issues using a mailed questionnaire. Although that study included questions about membership and activism in organizations, it did not examine women's representation in communal organizations *from the point of view of the organization*.

Indeed, there are few formal organizational statistics for British Jewry other than synagogue membership and Jewish school enrollment. It is therefore unsurprising that data about the participation of British Jewish women in communal life were not available as a background to the Review findings.

However, this lack of simple knowledge, at so late a date after the explosion in women's studies generally, is astounding both in the light of the growth of feminism and from the more parochial viewpoints of both formal Jewish pronouncements and the contribution of Jewish women to community and continuity. If the Jewish wife is indeed "a woman of worth," why this neglect? If Jewish identity is transmitted more through home, female-related practices than in any other way (Kosmin & Levy, 1983), why were women's activities not worthy of further examination? From a different perspective, since the British Jewish community seems to rely to such an extent on female input, particularly as volunteers (Kosmin & Levy, 1981) and fund raisers, is it not important to examine how women

contribute to the community?

These questions prompted an organizational audit, the results of which are reported in this article, which brings together information from many sources. Its core is this preliminary organizational audit, carried out first in 1992 and repeated in 1994 with the cooperation of some general community organizations and in liaison with large-scale Jewish women's organizations. This small study aimed to develop illustrative statistics for women's membership and participation at the committee level in general communal organizations. In tandem with this study, an exercise was undertaken coordinating membership numbers of women's organizations and evaluating levels of central involvement. Where possible the data have been given an historical perspective, and as appropriate, analyses of data from the Review have been incorporated. At the same time, the article examines information about British Jewish women from a number of wider community studies.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND ASSOCIATED INDICES

The latest estimate shows that women constituted 55% of the British Jewish core population of 308,000 in the mid-1980s (Haberman & Schmool, 1995). This compares with 51% of the total population of Great Britain that is female. Of the Jewish female population as a whole, 57% are in the Greater London (metropolitan) community with the remaining 43% in the outlying regions. This reflects the overall community geography where 59% of the estimated total Jewish population is to be found within Greater London and the tangential areas of South East Hertfordshire and South West Essex (Waterman & Kosmin, 1986).

Like women in England and Wales generally, Jewish women are currently living longer than men. On the average, British Jewish men die at age 76.8 years, whereas women live to 80.5 years. This extra longevity of women is reflected in the age

structure: 24% of the total Jewish population were 65 and over, but 27% of Jewish women fell into this age group.

The primary means of affiliation to community in Britain is synagogue membership. Approximately 215,000 (70% of the core population) are associated, however nominally, with a synagogue. Although until recently synagogue membership and its attendant activities have been viewed as a male province, women are now frequently involved formally with synagogues either as individuals or through family membership. In 1990, of the 101,239 households and individuals recorded as being affiliated with a synagogue (Schmool & Cohen, 1991), 85,587 were households with family membership, which indicates a female member (as wife or partner). A further 9335 women had personal synagogue membership as single women, divorcees, or widows. These two groups together suggest that 94% of synagogue membership has a female component, whereas a parallel calculation taking account of individual male membership shows 91% male involvement.

This differential occurs mainly because women who outlive their husbands are likely to maintain a previous synagogue membership for burial or sentimental or traditional reasons. Additionally, formal synagogue membership is more common among older members of the community. Because outmarriage in previous generations disproportionately involved a male (resulting in a reduced number of potential Jewish husbands at a time when daughters were unlikely to leave home other than to marry) (Prais & Schmool, 1967), among older synagogue members we find, in addition to widows, older women who have never married and are members in their own right.

Although data have yet to be established, mention must be made here of the less formal, alternative *minyanim*. These primarily have younger participants (mainly 18- to 30-year-olds), do not require formal membership, and are fluid in their makeup. They are often an outreach attempt to involve the disenfranchised and other non-join-

ers. Informal inquiries among a number of London-based groups suggest moderate levels of female participation.

At the young end of the age structure, of the 16,000 children recorded as being in Jewish day school education in the school year 1991/92, 53% were female, representing 29% of the estimated Jewish girls aged 3 to 18 years. For the same ages, 26% of Jewish boys were at Jewish day schools. We have no direct explanation for this slight imbalance, which may relate to availability of places, different attitudes toward girls' and boys' education, concerns about boys' careers, or traditional attitudes about protecting girls.

These data are particularly germane because teaching in Jewish day schools is predominantly a female occupation. Unpublished tabulations from the 1986 International Census of Jewish Education show that some four of five teachers in Jewish day schools (including preschool and kindergartens) are women. Although this ratio may overstate the situation a little, because the right-wing Orthodox (mainly boys' schools did not supply complete information, the picture is clear.

There is evidence that a pool exists of women potentially capable of filling the teaching role. The national expansion of higher education opportunities for women has not bypassed the Jewish community. The Union of Jewish Students (UJS) has a Women's Officer to cater for the roughly half of UJS members who are women. Survey data show similar patterns: the Review of Women in the Community indicated that 20% of the respondents had had higher education; for women under 35 the proportion rose to 76%.

Nor is interest in education confined to the secular. Seventy (out of 71) trainees completing the Jews College "Learning for Teaching" program were women. Furthermore, this program was a direct result of the Traditional Alternatives "Women & the Jewish Future" symposium in 1990, which did much to bring women's issues to the

forefront of mainstream British Orthodox thinking.

EMPLOYMENT

One of the most marked trends in British society over the past 30 years has been the increased involvement of women in the labor force either on a full- or part-time basis. Currently, in Britain generally, 67% of women aged 16 to 65 are economically active (1991 Labor Force Statistics) and comprise 43% of the working population. The figure of 67% may be compared with 43% of all females aged 15 and over (excluding students) who were employed in 1971 and with 37% in 1961 (*Social Trends*, 1974). Of women currently working, 69% are married, and conversely 72% of married women are employed.

Although there are no trend data of this clarity for British Jewry, some light is thrown on Jewish women's employment patterns by various community studies. These show a general pattern of rising proportions of economically active women over the past 30 years. In fact, the increase in employment levels for Jewish women is very marked and is greater than that for women in Britain generally.

The Review of Women in the Community revealed that, of those women in the labor force, 56% worked part-time and one-third were self-employed. However, the very fact of having a job means that, whether or not she has a partner, an employed woman effectively has two jobs: as worker and homemaker. Indeed, the British Social Attitudes survey indicates that in 75% of all British households the woman is judged mainly responsible for general domestic duties; this figure falls only to 67% where both partners are working full-time (Jowell et al., 1992). British Jewish women seem to mirror these attitudes, as 73% of the affiliated sample in the Women's Review said that they were themselves mainly responsible for household duties, such as cleaning, and only 16% said the duties were shared with a partner. Consequently, as

women's organizations of all denominations are finding, the employed woman is left with little spare time.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

Recognition of these employment trends suggested the need for the information that an audit of women's involvement in communal organizations could produce. Certain counteracting forces are clear. Women's organizations are having to come to terms with the changing values that are reflected in the educational and occupational structure of their traditional membership pool. Moreover, while Jewish women attain a higher profile and confidence within the wider world of work and British society, secular communal (not to mention Orthodox religious) organizations hold to traditional attitudes on the role of women. These attitudes and values are, not unnaturally, articulated and assumed within the male-led older-established institutions of the community. In 1986 one initial elderly male reaction to the idea of a small-scale review of women's involvement was "why"—thereby ignoring more than half of British Jewry. More recently, comments during a debate on women at the Board of Deputies of British Jews in December 1992 echoed this attitude. Such public statements leave an overall impression that the institutional acceptance of women's role as caterer or deliverer of family meals has continued longer within the structured British Jewish community than within the general society of which it is part.

This persistence occurs despite the long-standing reality of women's commitment and organized activity within the community: the Federation of Women Zionists (WIZO) was established in 1918, Emunah in 1933, the League of Jewish Women in 1943, JIA Women's Division in 1971, and Hadassah in 1986. These and other general secular organizations provided information, which has been brought together here, to give structural dimensions to this participation.

Insofar as it was not possible to contact all communal secular organizations nor to approach the numerous groups in local community listings, the data given below are incomplete. Other formal and informal, temporary and permanent groupings and activities exist that never find their way into community directories, and some of these involve women. The logistics of data collection also excluded the very many large and small, private and organizationally supported fund-raising groups that are known to involve both men and women. Additionally this audit excludes individual Orthodox synagogue committees where women are sometimes prevented from participating. In sum, the audit was confined to the larger, secular Jewish organizations so as to provide fairly quickly a broad-brush picture of central organizational involvement.

As regards central *synagogal* involvement, the umbrella organizations of progressive synagogues—the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain and Union of Liberal & Progressive Synagogues—were asked for information about committee membership and about ladies guilds. To supplement this data with some evidence about Orthodox women's *synagogal* involvement, appropriate organizations participating in the Association of Jewish Women's Organizations (AJWO) were approached. But this is in no way a complete picture of women's religious involvement in the community. Newer patterns of female commitment to the spiritual aspects of British Jewish life are emerging. These include *Rosh Chodesh* (monthly) groups, *Tefilah* (prayer) groups, and *Shiurim* (lessons) for women and are developments that require focused quantitative and qualitative examination. A directory of *Rosh Chodesh* groups established in 1993 indicated that over 30 such groups were operative at that time, and by December 1994 the number had grown to approximately 40. These groups are found in both London and the Regions and involve women of all (and no) formal *synagogal* commitment.

HISTORICAL DATA

As a historical background to the findings of the current audit, a number of back editions of the *Jewish Year Book* were examined to monitor change over the last four decades. A constant list of the organizations in each *Year Book* was analyzed to see at what level women had been involved. In all, 13 organizations were reviewed. Whereas in the earlier years women who held office did so mainly in small organizations, usually as honorary secretary, by the 1980s they were chairwomen of larger general organizations. Where a woman was a communal employee, in the early years this was almost solely as a secretary but by the 1970s the pattern was beginning to change. A striking instance is afforded by the Board of Deputies of British Jews. In 1965 a woman was appointed as research officer—the first woman to be appointed to a non-secretarial position; in 1995 three of the four departmental executive directors are female.

A further indication of this change in the pattern of female employment within the community comes from the Association of Jewish Communal Professionals (AJCP) set up in 1988. By 1992 it had 71 paid-up members, of whom 33 were women, and at the end of 1994, 67 of its 123 members were women. Women have featured consistently and strongly in AJCP leadership. The present chairperson is a woman, as was one of the original co-chairs; five of the current 13 members of the executive committee are women. Members of the AJCP hold middle-management or higher positions within their organizations, which broadly cover the welfare, educational, fund-raising, synagogal, and political spheres of communal activity. The women members have a wide range of skills that are very much in contrast to the confined (and confining) roles permitted to women in earlier decades.

THE CURRENT PICTURE

In the summer of 1992 data were collected from 40 general and 5 women's member-

ship organizations. The questionnaire was adapted to take account of differences between the general bodies and women's groups; data for each sector are accordingly slightly different. The general organizations include representative organizations, umbrella Zionist groups and Israel-oriented institutions, youth organizations, and umbrella religious bodies, including the Orthodox. Israeli political support groups and fund-raising "Friends" groups are specifically excluded. The range of organizations covered meant that internal structures varied very widely from one to another. Some had one central committee with many small voluntary groups; others had a more formal subcommittee structure. In such a situation, any standardization of membership seemed inappropriate and, accordingly, information was sought only for the major executive committee. The questionnaire had a simple format, and the quality of returns was excellent.

The secular women's organizations (all of which participated) reported for 1992 a total of 333 groups throughout the country, the same number as in 1982; in 1994 the number was 314. Over the decade from 1982 to 1992, total enrollment in these organizations rose from 21,450 to 23,070 (including just under 200 men). In 1994 the total membership had risen to 24,440. This would suggest that in spite of the perceived problem of involving working women in traditional organizations, the women's organizations (most of which are concerned with Israel) have to date successfully taken on the challenge of maintaining membership levels. But these bare data, of course, mask changes in the age structure of membership. This is recognized when, for example, the incoming chairwoman of British WIZO is reported as saying "A lot of people still see WIZO as a club for their mothers."

To the basic 45 organizations must be added many other small groups, particularly the unnumbered "ladies guilds," the historic means of women's involvement in synagogue affairs. Although membership fig-

ures were not coordinated, the groups were not totally disregarded. Information provided to the CRU in the course of an 1989 study of small communities was appraised, and a small representative sample of synagogues was approached to find out how widespread ladies' guilds are throughout Britain. These two lines of inquiry indicated that almost all synagogues still have a guild, with the proviso that, in Reform, Liberal, and some newer Orthodox synagogues, the traditional ladies' guild has become "the guild" or the "all purpose/activities' committee, which has both men and women members.

INVOLVEMENT, PARTICIPATION, AND OFFICE HOLDING

Membership figures only indicate a minimum level of involvement. However, the intensity of central organizational activity may be judged to a degree from committee membership and office holding. Therefore, a number of umbrella organizations were asked to provide committee lists for analysis, but again, the data are in no way exhaustive. Table 1 analyzes these committee lists showing the female proportion of committee members and officers: for women's organizations the analysis indicates how many people are core, head-office activists.

In its 1991-4 triennial, in Britain's major secular representative body, the Board of Deputies, 25% of 192 committee *places* were filled by women; and 20% of 177 committee *members* were women. For the current 1994-97 triennial, 20% of the reduced number of committee places are filled by women, and at the same time 20% of the members are women. When we look at other organizations we see that, in 1992, 23% of 172 committee *places* identified on major representative councils were taken by women, and by 1994 this proportion had risen slightly to 25%

There is a noteworthy degree of consistency in representation levels throughout the country. That of the Board can be put in a long-term context. The Board in its

1991-4 triennial had 71 women deputies, some 17%, and in its current 1994-97 triennial, the number has risen to 83—23% of a smaller Board total. These figures show real improvement in representation over the last 30 years. In 1962, there were five women deputies (1% of the Board), with four of the five being on committees. As the number of women deputies has risen, the proportion elected to committees has declined; currently 30 of the 83 women serve on committees. This indicates both a normalization and a problem. The women elected as deputies are no longer a small, special minority of the Jewish female population. Unfortunately, the Board's custom of arranging evening and lunch-time committee meetings in central London makes it difficult for women who work in or near suburban homes to attend. Particularly, it creates problems for mothers with school-aged children. However, as women become a larger proportion of the streamlined Board, attitudes within the Board are beginning to change, particularly as many of the new women deputies are younger. In these circumstances, which are mirrored in other organizations, this paramount stumbling block to increased women's participation is being addressed, and some committee meetings are now being held in conjunction with monthly Board meetings on a Sunday. Nevertheless, until such issues are widely confronted and resolved, it is inappropriate to ask whether or not women's representation in these organizations has reached a ceiling.

The four Representative Councils cover different-sized communities situated in the northern urban industrial communities. They constitute the major part of regional Jewry. In the two years reviewed, women's participation ranged from 18% to 25%. It is interesting to note here that since these communities share a common pattern of historical development, similar social attitudes and processes are perhaps being maintained in all of them.

Three major women's organizations allowed us to review their head office com-

Table 1. Membership and Office Holding by Women

Board of Deputies of British Jews		
Women deputies		
1962	1%	(5 out of 500)
1991-4	17%	(71 out of 418)
1994-7	23%	(83 out of 360)
Women on board committees		
1962	80%	(4 out of 5 women deputies)
1991	61%	(43 out of 71)
1994	36%	(30 out of 83)
	<u>1991-94</u>	<u>1994-97</u>
Number of committee places*	192	184
Percentage filled by women	25%	20%
Number of committee members*	177	148
Percentage who were women	20%	20%
Other Organizations		
	<u>1992</u>	<u>1994</u>
Representative Council		
<input type="checkbox"/> Memberships	20-25% female	18-25% female
Committee places	172	196
	23% filled by women	25% filled by women
Progressive Central Synagogue		
<input type="checkbox"/> Councils' memberships	20-33% female	22-25% female
Major Women's Organizations		
	<u>1992</u>	<u>1994</u>
Membership	23,070	24,440
Central Council membership	1.6%	1.5%

*Some people serve on more than one committee.

mittee lists in full. In 1992 there were a total of 362 and in 1994 there were 375 women active at the national level. Whatever the organization, these activists work as unpaid volunteers managing large, structured societies (of which WIZO and Emunah together were responsible for an expenditure of some £2.5 million in 1991/2). The data for the two years indicate that about 1.5% of members act at the senior organizational level.

This analysis, concentrating as it does on head office participation, neglects high levels of commitment and activity at the local branch level in both the metropolitan and regional areas. There was no attempt to assess the extent of grassroots participation, activity, and organizational effort. Such an exercise would have required different techniques and would have been valuable only if it had looked in some way at individual members' activity levels as opposed to

group records. However, regular reading of the national and regional Jewish press, review of synagogue and community magazines, and analysis of reports in the organizations' own house journals all confirm just how widespread and continuing such activity is within the established community. Data from the Women's Review corroborate this picture, showing that 52% of all respondents had had some connection with a Jewish organization or group in the 12 months before the study (Schmool, 1994).

New forms of women's communal association, such as *chavurot* and a Jewish Women's Network, are blossoming in Britain. These initiatives attract younger women, those about age 35 to 40 and those who have not found a way into the synagogue-centered subcommunity. The Women's Review found that 62% of synagogally unaffiliated women had attended a Jewish group or activity in the previous year. However, there was a difference in the character of organization they frequented. Although affiliated women were involved in traditional organizations, such as the League of Jewish Women, which focus on service and charitable work, the unaffiliated belong to newer organizations (e.g., singles groups, Holocaust support groups) and/or attend activities that have an adult education component. These activities do not promote close-knit involvement within a locality and suggest an individualistic orientation to community (Schmool, 1994).

One major issue confronting women's volunteer management of their own communal organizations is whether appropriately able and skilled women will continue to participate in this economically unrewarded activity. Or will circumstance, attitude, and interest move them to use their talents in other, financially remunerated fields? External factors affect these individual decisions, not least the state of the employment market and the availability of proper child care facilities. Although women's employment is increasing, counteracting forces are at work. For example, on

the one hand there are high levels of youth and college graduate un/underemployment, and on the other, married women may be supporting unemployment-struck families. Women are going back to paid employment in their middle years, but are living longer. They may therefore take up voluntary work in their sixties, rather than in their forties.

Again there is evidence from the Women's Review that relates to these trends. Half a subsample (N=362) of synagogue members and 46% of the (225) unaffiliated considered themselves volunteers in the widest sense. However, although three-quarters of the affiliated worked only in a Jewish organization, 40% of the unaffiliated volunteers were active solely in a non-Jewish cause. Just under half of the employed women did some type of volunteer work, in contrast to 53% of housewives and 65% of retired women. Overall, involvement in some kind of voluntary work was not significantly related to age, although the nature of the volunteer activity was not specified and for the younger women may involve child- or school-centered activity, rather than more direct communal organizational management. Furthermore, it seems that the community may lose more from the attractions of the wider community than from a disinclination to volunteer per se as younger, unaffiliated women contribute to the community through non-Jewish causes (Schmool & Miller, 1994).

THE FUTURE

The levels of participation discussed here show that women are underrepresented in the leadership of general institutions. However, as the data from the Women's Review indicate, this low level of central participation is buttressed by widespread grassroots activity in a range of women's organizations. These data are not surprising and should be taken as a stimulus to change. They provoke questions, rather than provide answers.

At an organizational level, the combined input of women has not previously been

evaluated on a community-wide basis. This situation persisted even though the Spanish and Portuguese community has had women on its central committee since 1872 (Alderman, 1992) and despite the fact that two women's organizations operated in Britain before 1939—in one case since 1918. Although the members of these organizations may celebrate diamond jubilees, write in-house histories, and read of their groups' successes, there has been no overview of what they together provide the community. This provision has been substantial and not only financial; nor is it simply as set down in the stated objectives of any group. Although a mission statement may stress that members learn from education programs, it will not necessarily underline that they maintain close Jewish friendship networks through shared activity. Groups formed to raise funds for Israel may, for example, become surrogate families in times of geographical mobility. These latent functions help consolidate the community's social fabric and render women's organizations a female substitute for the synagogue as a mode of communal affiliation.

Over the last 10 years, membership levels in women's organizations have been maintained, but there are indications that this is a result of the aging of the community. As women live longer, they generally continue memberships in organizations joined at younger ages. Through long service and the fact that they have time available, they then become the leaders. In an aging community, if they cling to office, leadership can become out of touch with the attitudes and ideas of younger people and discourage them from joining something perceived as old-fashioned. Certainly, the women's organizations have been aware of this danger and of the need to attract younger members and groom them for leadership. Thus, for example, WIZO has developed professional women's groups that meet during lunch time in London and has set up groups for singles and young marrieds (to which husbands may also belong).

Nevertheless, the data on patterns of membership of younger and unaffiliated women suggest a generational change in the nature of Jewish activity and make it appropriate to ask how strong traditional organizations will be in the future. The times and societies that maintained the "equal but separate" ethos of British Jewish society are rapidly disappearing. Simultaneously, women are embracing wider horizons within the community and beyond it, particularly within the world of work. Women's employment need not necessarily prevent their joining voluntary organizations, but it can mean that they volunteer in the wider, rather than the Jewish, world. Furthermore, employment and the widespread experience of higher education are leading women to develop both new skills and a world view different from that of their mothers' generation. Schmool and Miller (1994) found that women responding to their questionnaire did not uncritically follow the example set by the generation that preceded them and that, even among affiliated women, only one-third completely followed their mother in how they felt about their Jewishness. Such a shift in attitudes can be expected to affect communal behavior and organization involvement.

Conversations with younger professional women and qualitative evidence to the Review on Women reinforce this appraisal. Although they are involved emotionally in the community and wish to continue to lead a Jewish life, these younger women are drawn to the type of organizations that concentrate on personal, Jewish development. This is an intellectual orientation far removed from the direct contribution of the older women, and it is unclear whether it will inculcate or promote an ethos of communal service in the way that traditional, hands-on practical activity has done. Perhaps we will see a division of communal labor that is based on inclination and ability, rather than on gender. This will permit those women who wish to maintain a traditional orientation to community to do so.

But, at the same time, as men become members of Guilds or young married WIZO groups, they may share the roles hitherto reserved for women. In parallel, increased women's representation on synagogue councils, the Board of Deputies, and other umbrella organizations widens the organizational roles and opportunities for the growing body of able, educated, and motivated women who wish to do more than cater functions or run friendship clubs. And as there are more women in high professional positions, they may be expected to attract these women to their specific organizations.

The Review on Women created expectations among British Jewish women. It permitted them to voice very many opinions on a wide range of topics and pushed for a re-evaluation of their position in the community. However, from the beginning there were doubts as to whether their opinions would be heeded. Particularly there was concern that the re-evaluation be both strong and fast enough to ensure that Jewish women do not feel denied and devalued by the established community. If the rising generation is in due course to sustain and regenerate organizations that have become an integral part of the communal framework, the shift in their attitudinal patterns must be taken into account, as must their abilities, needs, and social situation.

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