

## POSITIONING WOMEN FOR NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

By Shifra Bronznick

The Jewish community is failing to harness the talents of women in leadership. Women are seriously underrepresented on the boards and among senior officers and executive staff of national Jewish organizations, with few exceptions. Minority status in leadership circles severely impedes women's ability to participate in shaping the priorities of the Jewish communal world. This current gender imbalance has grave future ramifications for Jewish organizations hoping to compete for the loyalty of coming generations of Jews.

Rarely is the gender gap discussed with any candor in the Jewish organizational world. Women commonly avoid raising it, fearing that they will lose status in the organization and become pigeonholed as women's rights advocates, rather than being respected for their individual talents. Men, for their part, tend not to recognize the issue of women's leadership as a matter of priority on the organizational agenda.

This is a mistake. It is a matter of great priority. Women's equality is growing in importance in the eyes of Americans of every background. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Jewish women are among the most ardent advocates of women's equality. Research documents that Jewish women are among the most highly educated women in the United States. Close to half of all Jewish women are college graduates, compared with only 17 percent of non-Jewish white women<sup>1</sup>. And yet, the Jewish communal world is not advancing women with any rapidity on either the lay or professional front.

Indeed, far from showing significant progress in advancing women to leadership posts, there is reason to believe that Jewish organizations are at risk of experiencing a decline in the foreseeable future in the role and influence of women in their leadership ranks, for reasons that will be explained below.

Unless these trends are addressed and corrected through deliberate action, Jewish organizations are likely to find themselves viewed increasingly as an unattractive vehicle for voluntary activity by Jewish women. For a community that considers appealing to young Jews a matter of highest priority, this should be an alarming prospect.

This article will examine women's underrepresentation in Jewish organizational leadership from varied points of view. We shall describe the degree of women's representation from a statistical point of view, explore the reasons for this underrepresentation, explain why this must be regarded as an urgent problem, and offer some strategies for rectifying it.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry A. Kosmin, Sidney Goldstein, Joseph Waksberg, Nava Lerer, Ariella Keysar, and Jeffrey Scheckner *Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey* (New York, 1991), A Publication of the Council of Jewish Federations in association with The Mandell Berman Institute-North American Jewish Data Bank, The Graduate School & University Center, CUNY, p. 11, table 3b.

Much of the information is drawn from research commissioned by Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC on the Upper West Side, as well as from the Women's Leadership Initiative, a program launched by Ma'yan, for which I have served as a consultant. The goal of the initiative is to develop methods by which Jewish organizations can voluntarily increase women's representation and impact at the leadership level.

## **THE SCORECARD**

In 1994, Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project commissioned three scholars to undertake a study of women in the leadership of national Jewish organizations. The study, *The Roles of Women and Men on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations: A Research Report*, published in November 1997, sought to document the degree to which women are represented as board members, senior officers and top staff professionals of national Jewish organizations.

The researchers, Dr. Bethamie Horowitz, Dr. Pearl Beck and Dr. Charles Kadushin of the Center for Social Research and the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, began by developing a list of 45 national Jewish organizations considered most influential in the field. They then studied those 45 to understand the role women played in leadership. They further sought, through interviews, to explore the influence that women board members actually wield on their boards.

The study's findings were disseminated widely in a report based on the research, published by Ma'yan under the title, *Power and Parity: Women on the Boards of Major American Jewish Organizations*. In all, 2,315 members of boards of national organizations were included in this study. Of these, 25 percent were women.

Of the 45 key national organizations studied in 1994:

- 6 of the boards had 6% or fewer female members.
- 11 of the boards had 15% or fewer female members.
- 23 of the boards had fewer than 25% female members.

Two of the 45 organizations were chartered as all-women's organizations, and two were men-only.

Representation of women dropped dramatically to 12 percent at the highest echelon of board leadership. Only five of 41 co-ed organizations were headed by a female president in 1994, and in one of the five, the woman served as co-president with a man.

Although the professional arena was not the primary focus of this study, it is worth noting that of 30 national organizations that answered the researchers' survey question pertaining to executive staff:

- 53% had no women in their five highest salaried positions.
- 27% had one woman among the top five positions.
- 13% had two women among the top five positions.
- 7% had three women among the top five positions.

- Only one had a woman in the highest salaried position.

Significantly, none of the major Jewish defense agencies had a woman chief executive, and only one had ever had a woman in this position - two decades ago. Every institution of the four main Jewish religious denominations, with the exception of women's leagues, was headed by a man.

Given the critical role that top professionals play in identifying, training and mentoring lay leaders, the fact that an overwhelming majority of chief executives are men has the effect of reinforcing the existing tendencies toward exclusion of women from leadership. This is a factor that must be taken carefully into account in developing strategies for change.

## **THE IMPACT OF MINORITY STATUS**

When the Ma'yan report was about to be released, there seemed to be a sense in the Jewish world that a three-to-one ratio of men to women on national boards overall need not be considered a drastic imbalance. Complacency was most marked among male trustees, who are less likely than their women colleagues to consider gender balance a matter of priority.

This was clear in the survey's findings. When respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement with the statement, "Women are adequately represented on the boards of most Jewish organizations," 48 percent of women disagreed strongly, but only 16 percent of men disagreed strongly. This tacit acceptance of gender imbalance is often exacerbated by fear that placing too many women in senior leadership can lessen an organization's influence. Witness fears expressed by some synagogue leaders, and continually discussed in the Jewish media, that too many women in leadership roles will result in fewer men interested in board service.

The women's leadership project has uncovered a more subtle layer of complacency as well. Even where concern is expressed at the imbalance, responses suggest an underlying assumption that as women continue to advance in other arenas, including the religious and professional spheres, inequities in the leadership of national Jewish organizations will gradually correct themselves.

There is little basis for such confidence. In reality, it will be difficult to create a level playing field without proactive initiatives by top leadership in the Jewish communal world. Research indicates that in organizational settings where women constitute only one-fourth of leadership, an atmosphere is created that actually detracts from women's effectiveness as leaders. Their functioning in a board setting is impaired at that level of underrepresentation because individuals are seen through the filter of their minority status rather than as integrated members of the whole. The tipping point - the point at which women are able to function as effective members of the whole - seems to be at least 33 percent. In effect, the likelihood of the imbalance correcting itself, in response to larger societal processes, is impeded by the very fact of the imbalance.

This statistical reality is made clear in Rosabeth Moss Kanter's *Men and Women of the Corporation*.

Sex ratios ... predict a large number of behavioral phenomena, from the degree of power men and women feel to the ways they cope with the economic and sexual

aspects of their lives.... Skewed groups are those in which there is a large preponderance of one type or another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15. The numerically dominant types also control the group and its culture in enough ways to be labeled 'dominants.' ... Next, tilted groups begin to move toward less extreme distributions and less exaggerated effects. In this situation, with ratios of perhaps 65:35, dominants are just a 'majority' and tokens become a 'minority.' Minority members have potential allies among each other, and form coalitions, and can affect the culture of the group.<sup>2</sup>

The impact on women of minority status is vividly demonstrated in an experiment reported by Virginia Valian in *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*.

Students in an MBA program were asked to evaluate a female applicant for a managerial job. The students were given eight applications, filled out on standard forms in different handwritings; the forms provided information about each applicant's academic background, work experience and interests.

Students evaluated the target applicant on the basis of how qualified she was, whether she should be hired, and how much potential she possessed. In addition they rated her on four dimensions: ambitious-unambitious, emotional-rational, decisive-indecisive, tough-soft. When women were 25 percent or less of the applicant pool, the female applicant was evaluated more negatively than when women made up 37.5 percent or more of the pool. That is, when women made up 25 percent or less of the applicant pool, the female applicant was perceived of as more stereotypically feminine - closer to the unambitious, emotional, indecisive, and soft end of the scales - than when women made up 37.5 percent or more of the pool.<sup>3</sup>

This indicates the extent of difficulty women face in positioning themselves for leadership in a Jewish organizational universe where only 12 out of 41 organizational boards were more than one-third female, and 23 boards out of 41 were less than one-fourth female.

This has added significance when one considers the negative feedback women leaders have been shown to receive in certain settings. Valian, in *Why So Slow?*, reports an experiment documenting this feedback process. Groups were created of four people - two men and two women - and asked to resolve a specific issue. Two of the four - a man and a woman - were trained to play varying roles of leader, co-leader or non-leader. They were trained to use similar leadership styles, friendly, cooperative and pleasantly assertive, and to follow practiced scripts so that the male and female leader offered identical proposals, reasons and suggestions.

The researchers found that the participants who had not been informed of the experiment's nature showed, through their facial expressions, a predictable pattern of positive and negative reactions to leadership, based on gender.

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<sup>2</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 208-209.

<sup>3</sup> Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 140-141.

An assertive leader appears to arouse a certain amount of resentment in other group members, even when the leader is male. For male leaders, the negative reactions they receive are more than offset by positive reactions. Men end up with a net gain. For female leaders, on the other hand, the negative reactions outnumber the positive ones. Women end up with a net loss. When the naive participants were queried afterwards about the personalities of the trained students, they rated the trained males in each leadership condition as having more ability, skill and intelligence than the corresponding females. The females were rated as too emotional, relative to the males. When the females served as leaders or co-leaders, they were perceived as bossy and dominating relative to the males.<sup>4</sup>

A final, crucial factor that impedes women's leadership is the oft-discussed phenomenon of self-fulfilling expectations. Extensive research has shown how women who are told that as women they are expected to perform poorly in various arenas, in fact, do fail in those spheres. Negative expectations have a direct impact on performance.

One experiment cited by Valian is worth recounting. A researcher divided a group of high scorers on a math test into male and female groups. Before another math test,

[H]alf of the female students were told that women typically scored lower on it than men did. The other half of the female students were told that the test was one in which no gender difference was found. The women who had been told that women typically did worse than men scored lower on the test than the male students who were taking the test at the same time. The women who were told the test showed no gender differences scored the same as the male students.<sup>5</sup>

All these factors can adversely affect women's performance as minority members of boards, thus limiting their own advancement and weakening incentives to recruit more women in the future.

## **THE OBSTACLES TO WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP**

In addition to the well-documented factors impeding women's advancement in the organizational world in general, there are specific obstacles confronting women who seek to participate in national Jewish communal leadership. In my discussions with dozens of women board members, executives of Jewish organizations and experts in the fields of women's leadership, and in analyzing the researchers' findings, a clear list emerges of real and perceived obstacles to women's advancement in national Jewish organizations.

Real and perceived obstacles are considered together for the purposes of this paper, because research demonstrates that performance is directly affected by expectations. Thus, if women are seen in a certain light, this will color their performance and have an impact on the quality of their leadership. In this sense, perception becomes reality.

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<sup>4</sup> Valian, *Why So Slow?*, pp. 130-131.

<sup>5</sup> Valian, *Why So Slow?*, p. 156.

Seven key obstacles emerged repeatedly in these conversations.

1. Most women board members are perceived as less powerful than most male board members. The women who are full-time volunteers often do not command as much respect as men because they do not generate income or control philanthropic resources. The women who are employed often rank lower in the business or professional sphere than their male counterparts on boards, and thus enter the philanthropic arena with less prestige.
2. The cream of the crop - top female executives in the business, corporate, academic and professional worlds - are often alienated by the conventions of national Jewish organizations, most notably the "boys' club" environment. These women are likely to be sought after by many corporate and not-for-profit boards. They are unlikely to welcome the cumbersome process of wading through the bureaucracy characterizing Jewish organizational life.
3. Women - even some of the most prominent women leaders - are commonly reported by organizational executives and lay leaders as being too often unwilling or unable to give major leadership gifts. Often, women leaders are reported as having succeeded despite their inability or unwillingness to contribute at the level of their male counterparts. Moreover, women often resist the quid pro quo, transactional fund-raising style that, for all its criticized shortcomings, remains at the core of most traditional fund-raising campaigns.
4. There is a serious gap between the men and women in their self-perceived expertise in areas of finance, budget and accounting. In Ma'yan's *Power and Parity* report, fully 60 percent of male board members described themselves as having expertise in these areas, compared to 27 percent of female members. Women tended to serve much less frequently on finance and investment committees, which are among the most powerful board committees. The lack of financial expertise often makes women seem less effective as fiduciaries of the organizations.
5. Women frequently report that their ideas are credited to others. An unpublished consultant's study of a corporation that was being challenged by its women executives on issues of bias indicated that an idea must be raised three to five times before it is given group support. Women, as a minority, will inevitably find many of their original ideas credited to men. Other research has indicated that women talk more than men when they are leaders and are listened to less, further reducing credit and recognition.
6. Overall, women treat their board involvement less pragmatically than do men. Men are reported more frequently than women as positioning themselves for appointment to boards, important committees and visible positions. Women commonly report that they consider it inappropriate to vie for posts in the philanthropic arena. Men are also more likely to view their board service as a matter of prestige and to mix philanthropic and professional activities. Women seem more likely to value separating these spheres. As a result, women often benefit less from their board involvement in terms of power, prestige and political leverage.
7. A wealth of research has shown that women continue to perform and feel responsible for two-thirds of the housework and childcare. The extensive travel and time requirements of many national boards can make it more difficult to attract and involve women board members with

children at home. Again, this situation is exacerbated for women who are employed full-time. Among women board members aged 52 and younger, 65 percent worked full-time.

## **GENERATIONAL SHIFT: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYED WOMEN**

One of the most alarming trends to emerge from the research on Jewish women's leadership is an incipient decline in the influence of women on the boards of Jewish voluntary organizations, simultaneous with their increased entry into the workforce.

For nearly two centuries, women serving as "full-time volunteers" have constituted a key backbone of American Jewish organizational activity. Today the proportion of Jewish women following that life path is fast declining, as growing numbers choose professional careers. However, employed women are not entering the voluntary Jewish sphere in the same numbers and with the same impact as their full-time volunteer predecessors.

The trend among Jewish women toward full-time employment is unmistakable. Ma'yan reported in *Power and Parity* that in 1994, among women board members over the age of 52, two-fifths were full-time volunteers, while only one-fifth were employed full-time. Among women under the age of 52, only one-tenth were full-time volunteers. As noted, 65 percent - nearly two-thirds - worked full-time.

The study attempted to measure not only the representation of women on national boards, but their relative influence on those boards. Toward this end, the researchers used three measures to gauge an individual's influence in a board setting. These were:

- Becoming an officer;
- Rating oneself as influential, and
- Serving on multiple boards. Serving on multiple boards is a widely accepted way for volunteer Jewish activists to increase their influence by positioning themselves as power brokers among the various power-centers in the community.

In comparing full-time employed women board members to full-time employed men and full-time women volunteers, the researchers found that full-time employed women scored lowest in all three categories of influence. They were the least likely of all board members, male or female, to become officers, to rate themselves as influential and to serve on multiple boards. This lower rating held true despite the fact that these full-time employed women devoted the same number of hours to the board most important to them as did their full-time employed male counterparts.

The implications are startling. As the proportion of Jewish women entering the work force continues to rise - following clear generational patterns - the continued exclusion of professional women from influential roles in Jewish voluntary organizations will inevitably lead to a decline in women's participation.

The issue of serving on multiple boards has particular importance in plotting board recruitment strategies for working women. The study commissioned by Ma'yan looked particularly closely at lay leaders who served on boards of national organizations that the researchers considered most

central to the community. They found that among full-time volunteer women, fully 41 percent served on more than one board, compared to 25 percent of men. But among full-time employed women, only 16 percent served on more than one board. As a result, full-time employed women are less likely to be visible as "players" in that interlocking directorate from which so many Jewish board members emerge.

## **RECRUITING WOMEN FOR NATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

To date, efforts to increase the number of women leaders have focused primarily on addressing the skills deficit perceived to hamper women's advancement. This approach, while sometimes useful, addresses only half the problem. As the research indicates, many women would benefit from such leadership training, whether to learn budget analysis, gain confidence in their decision-making abilities, strengthen their political skills or improve their public speaking. They are also likely to learn from the chance to work with other women in important professional posts, particularly as more women obtain positions in campaign and finance.

There is a danger, however, in limiting responses to providing positive role models and offering skills training. Leadership development programs that focus on enhancing women's abilities, without changing organizational climate and structures, may simply yield small successes for token women. This could actually worsen the problem by convincing all concerned that the problem is with women, not with the status quo.

If Jewish organizations hope to resolve the women's leadership crisis facing them, they must address their own shortcomings by creating real avenues for advancement, positioning women for leadership and identifying and overcoming the external obstacles - both real and perceived - that constrain women's opportunities to lead.

Responses must be strategic and long-term. While some board members report having criticized their own organizations for failing to nominate women to leadership posts, few have been strategic in their efforts to lobby for women candidates. Rather than persuading the leaders of their organizations to take the initiative in advance to identify, recruit and support new female board members, advocates for women find themselves critiquing the lack of women prospects at a point in the process when it is too late to rectify the situation.

Proactive initiatives can make the difference. A concerted campaign to recruit and involve prospective board members from diverse circles - and across organizational lines - should be launched by a coalition of Jewish leaders. This initiative should be staffed by professionals with expertise in board development and executive recruitment. Sufficient funding should be in place to allow for sophisticated marketing and outreach aimed at new constituencies.

The leaders of this campaign should be encouraged to test different strategies for recruitment, training and involvement. Failure should be expected and even encouraged. To break through the barriers that have kept so many potential women leaders obscured from view will require courage and creativity.



Recruitment of women leaders should be orchestrated by casting the nets as widely as possible. The ranks of supporters of universities, cultural institutions, advocacy organizations, and social service agencies should be scrutinized as sources of prospective board members. The leadership training and learning programs run by Wexner, CLAL and Hadassah should be asked to identify appropriate candidates for national boards. Active attempts should be made to reach out to less traditional constituencies. Local leaders - from the outgoing president of a synagogue to the past chair of a Federation campaign - should be invited to contribute their talents to special national projects. Individuals should then be matched up with appropriate national boards.

Mentoring can play a critical role in the recruitment and success of emerging leaders. A study conducted by the executive search firm Korn/Ferry International revealed that corporate leaders rated the cultivating and mentoring process as second only to education in having had a significant impact on their success.

In the local Jewish communal arena, professionals do, in fact, mentor women. Local professionals, particularly in Federations and JCC's, are frequently credited by prominent women board members with having positioned them for leadership.

This is not a coincidence. These executive directors cannot succeed in their work unless they continually identify and develop new leaders to run their institutions and raise money for their campaigns. Executive directors of national agencies tend to have numerous people coming up from the ranks who are jockeying for top posts. As a result, the CEO's of national Jewish agencies do not take on significant, direct responsibility for mentoring and positioning board leaders.

Local successes can be parlayed into national progress, if executives of local organizations undertake as a priority task the identification of successful local lay leaders for national posts. At the same time, male lay leaders and chief professionals in national life also need to reach out, cultivate and mentor women leaders.

National chief executives must add this task consciously to their portfolios, and should be held accountable for tangible results. Catalyst, an agency that has studied women in corporate management extensively, has found repeatedly that setting standards for accountability is a critical factor in the success of initiatives to advance women. It is crucial that the Jewish community find appropriate ways to monitor its institutions' progress in positioning women for leadership.

This is particularly crucial because of changing expectations among women. In earlier generations, when organizational boards recruited from full-time employed men and full-time women volunteers, it was almost accepted, however reluctantly, that most senior elected positions would be awarded to men. As growing proportions of women board members emerge from the business and professional world, they will inevitably expect to receive the same considerations of recognition and advancement as their male colleagues. Ironically, they may actually receive even less recognition than their full-time volunteer female predecessors. As we have seen, full-time employed women tend to rank lowest among the three categories in the influence they wield on boards.

Without careful cultivation and positioning, women are unlikely to become presidents or top officers of their organizations. If that advancement cap remains the norm in coming decades, it may be expected that women will simply leave and take their money and talent to more receptive arenas.

Women, more than men, make varied choices about the structure of their work lives. Many are employed full-time for their entire lives. Others decide to leave high-ranking careers for a period of time. There is still a strong cluster of full-time volunteers whose children are fully-grown, as well as an upcoming generation of female heirs who are taking on the leadership of their families' philanthropy. Professionals need to devise a strategy for identifying prospects for leadership of national organizations from each one of these sectors. A vigorous, focused search will be required in each of these arenas to produce the best talent.

Special thought should be given to offering leadership opportunities to the population of women who are full-time volunteers who are in their 50's and above. These women often have a strong record of communal accomplishments. With children no longer at home, they may be ready for greater involvement. And yet, in an era when so many women are entering the workforce, the experience and credentials of full-time volunteers are frequently devalued. Too often, national leaders and nominating committees no longer consider it a priority to identify board candidates from this population.

At the same time, it must not be forgotten that men tend not to mentor women in the workplace. Therefore, when male board members are asked to seek out new leaders for their organization, they rarely view women from their professional arenas as prime candidates. As the majority of board members are men, the likelihood that they will identify other men has an effect similar to that of compound interest, perpetuating gender imbalance and women's minority status.

## **INTEGRATING WOMEN AFTER RECRUITMENT**

As new groups of women enter national leadership, Jewish professionals will have to find a way to help them master the steep learning curve that characterizes the national Jewish organizational world.

Active mentoring at the national board level can help prepare women for successful leadership roles. A good, high-level mentoring program would match leaders at the very top levels of organizations with up-and-coming women. The mentors would be charged with finding ways to give their proteges access to important opportunities, both formal and informal. They would ensure that they are placed on committees or assigned projects; they would invite them to key meetings. They would nominate them for leadership posts. Mentors must give helpful feedback and counsel. They need to help make explicit the criteria for advancement. But the most valuable role mentors can play is to showcase the talents and expertise of their proteges in a visible manner that promotes their advancement.

Board training - for both men and women - that takes into account some of the preconceived notions about gender that constrict the perspectives of males and females alike can help break down the barriers that limit women's advancement. Professionals can play an important role in building the skills and enhancing the impact of their board members by customizing training programs for

individuals with varying sets of strengths and weaknesses. Creating explicit criteria for board members and clear expectations about each person's role and responsibility would also be beneficial.

Successful integration of women into leadership roles will also depend on structuring alternative forms of board involvement that use to best advantage the diverse interests and skills of the members of national boards. The stiff competition for people's time and energy makes it critical that individuals feel their board membership is both gratifying for them individually and productive for the institutions they serve.

This may apply not only to full-time employed women but to their partners as well. Men whose spouses are employed often take on more household and childcare responsibilities than the previous generation. They too become more selective in use of discretionary time. For some board members, involvement may become narrow and deep rather than broad and all-encompassing. This change in the board member's home and professional life must be reflected in strategies for recruitment and involvement of all younger board members, men and women alike.

At present, the top board positions - presidents and chairs - continue overwhelmingly to be held by men. At least 26 of the 41 organizations studied in *Power and Parity* never had a female president in their entire history. One major incentive for board members to devote resources and time to organizations is to have a chance to compete for the top position. Highly successful women are likely to size up the odds for success in the Jewish communal world, and determine that the most interesting opportunities are to be found elsewhere.

The focus of this effort is to strengthen women's impact on the leadership of national organizations. Creating gender balance and giving women access to top leadership posts are important steps in the process of building a better foundation to support Jewish communal endeavors. Equally important, is to develop an appreciation within the community for diverse voices and varied leadership styles. The results of these initiatives can significantly change the entire community by enhancing communal involvement for all those who wish to infuse fresh perspectives, creative thinking and new vitality into Jewish life.