

Bar- Ilan University

**Between Altruism and Egoism.  
Motherhood to a Big Family and Career –  
Experience of Religious Zionists Women.**

**Yael Binenfeld - Izak**

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's  
Degree in the School of Education, Bar- Ilan University

Ramat-Gan, Israel

2017

This work was carried out under the supervision of

**Prof. Zehavit Gross**

School of Education, Bar-Ilan University

## **Abstact**

This research explores the different components structuring religious Zionists working women's identity, who strive for career development while raising a big family. The aim of this research is to examine and describe how they experience the integration between taking care of a large family, and their career development, and how they cope with this combination.

The research of religious Zionists women's identity and experience relating the integration of career and family, is fairly new. The religious Zionists community is one of the revolutionary inventions of the modern civilization, since it inherently produces conflict between religious values and modern world values (Gross,2004). For example: democracy verses tradition and religion, hierarchy verses egalitarianism, and as we shall explore in this paper- values and perceptions regarding women's designation verses their own definition of their designation.

Former research shows a statistically Significant inverse association between the fertility rate, and parental education, particularly maternal literacy, indicating the more educated mother of the family is, the less children that family will have. In addition, research has found that women's maternal identity became more dominant and significant compare to their vocational identity, after they gave birth.

Although there is an inverse association between fertility rate and maternal literacy, in religious Zionists community there is a group of women who do not fit in this statistical cut. On the contrary, these women combine large families with career and academic education, willingly, despite the effort and difficulty involved in this choice.

### **Research question:**

What motivates careerist women, who lead a large family, to choose simultaneously two rolls which are both extremes of the family-employment conflict? Do they experience this conflict? and if they do, in what way? And finally, what strategies do they use to cope with this conflict?

### **Research population:**

The subjects of this research were pre-selected per parameters which were set in advance in accordance with their sectorial belonging. All the women in this study belong to the religious Zionists community in Israel, master's degree graduates, employed, and mothers to six or more children.

### **Methods:**

The data collecting tool in this research is a semi structured depth interview, including questions dealing with identity, career, family, family-employment conflict, and coping strategies. A depth interview is a narrative instrument, which allows the researcher a glimpse into the subject's inner world, interpretation from inside of the interviewee's experience and the meaning they make out of it. Findings were analyzed via Gross (1995) method, which includes four stages: word, category, category links, and theoretical module. This method was chosen due to its ability to evaluate social phenomena by analyzing the significance the individual gives his choices, conduct, and life.

### **Results and Discussion:**

This research examines What motivates careerist women, who lead a large family, to choose simultaneously two rolls which are both extremes of the family-employment conflict.

The research results show the most dominant influence on the choice of these women to combine career and a large family, was due to socialization and socialization agents who took part in shaping these women's identity and personal values. The women described their family of orientation as the most dominant factor which shaped their identity. Similarly, their mother's model, and different feminine characters influenced their identity and became a model for them. A large family is desirable and even ideal in these women's eyes- a goal they are directed to from early childhood. "family planning" is used by these women in context of choosing the size of your family, not connected to the question if to have a large family, but to the ability and option to control birth according to personal and family needs. Also in context of vocational development, there is directing and support from the family of orientation. Study results show a perception of academic education as a source of personal empowerment, creating

resources, and a feeling the career centered life style fits their unique personality structure.

Self-actualization is perceived as personal, ambitious-selfish. However, sense of mission is perceived as altruism, self-annulment, and doing for another. Supposedly, there is a contradiction between the two variables, self-actualization and sense of mission, which were brought up by these women as motives for combining family and career. According to Freidman's module, these women vary between pure altruism and pure egoism, in a way where between them are different behavioral patterns and values, like patronizing altruism and merciful selfishness, and many different motives are involved in their decision to combine family and career.

Another finding arising from the women's descriptions, is the awareness to their self-efficiency feeling being able to combine the family and career. Both fertility and vocational development are perceived as a mission. The sense of mission feeds the self-efficiency feeling of the women, eases the difficulties, and allows the conscious struggle with the load created from choosing both courses which consume resources.

The research findings bring different aspects- positive aspects such as abundance, self-actualization, and sense of mission, and on the other hand, negative aspects, such as overload, exhaustion, and tiredness. The women describe a continuous dynamic arrangement in order to reach balance which they seek. Another factor described by the interviewees is dealing with motherhood. This issue arises self-criticism and guilt feelings. The main difficulties in managing a large family as most women pointed out were:

1. The difficulty to identify each child's individual needs.
2. The difficulty to "reach" each and every child.

Nevertheless, it has been found the women legitimize the costs the children experience, and their own concessions, since in total they feel their family is a positive environment and the children's needs are fulfilled.

From study results it seems the interviewees perceive their function in the family more significant than their vocational role. Therefore, it seems the conflict is resolved to the

family's side, even if from time and resource management point of view the family gets less. This identity hierarchy allows the women to avoid internal identity conflict, and so the conflicts they face are external, since the decision has been made.

The interviewees show ambivalence towards the common term "large families", while as they prefer the term "family blessed with children". The women use different terminology to express different personal values, and thus decrease the discord and dissonance with the wide world standards regarding large families, resource depletion, and family planning. In addition, they use this strategy of redefining motherhood and family standards as they wish, and sort out their priorities according to their abilities and personal values.

Amongst coping strategies used by the women, are egalitarian point of view, religious outlook, and optimism. As opposed to former research which claims the larger and more religious the family is, the more conservative and dichotomic gender deviance becomes. In this research, we found perceptions of egalitarianism, and their appliance towards intimacy, parenthood and family. Women's entry to academy and employment triggered a change process resulting with assimilation of modern values into religious Zionists family gender deviance.

#### **Study's contribution:**

The study adds another significant level to theoretic literature regarding feminine identity and large families. This is a first in depth research allowing entry to the inner world of religious Zionists, educated, mothers to large families. Which, considering the findings of this research are an exceptional population. Subjects of this research were recruited from middle-high Socioeconomic status, and master's degree graduates, which is unique in the field of large families research, who usually examine low socioeconomic status families. This fact might require reexamination of existing theories regarding the inverse association between fertility rate and literacy, and considering new conceptualization suited to this research population.

Women of this research challenge common concepts and perceptions by presenting a new feminine figure. The new feminine module rising from the findings of this research,

is characterized by integration- a unique combination of Jewish literature and science, tradition and modernity, conservatism and openness, self-actualization and mission living (egoism-altruism)- combining Jewish life with employment. This research describes a case study about feminine, religious Zionists identity development, which does not reject tradition and old fashioned ideas, and on the other hand still stay connected to day to day life and modernity.