

Israel ultra-Orthodox women go hi-tech

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Bright and airy, the workspace at Comax is much like other Israeli hi-tech firms, except that a rabbi has carefully vetted its design to allow ultra-Orthodox Jewish women to work there.

The company in Holon near Tel Aviv employs 20 ultra-Orthodox women, one of several to do so as increasingly more female breadwinners from Israel's religious community join the secular work force.

Graduates of programming schools in the overwhelmingly ultra-Orthodox community of Bnei Brak, about 10 kilometres (six miles) away, the Comax women produce most of the firm's computer programmes for large supermarkets in the vicinity.

The ultra-Orthodox—known in Hebrew as haredi, or God-fearing—make up an estimated 11 percent of the Israeli population.

They abide by a strictly religious and traditional lifestyle, and men often study religion instead of working.

With a tradition of large families and low participation in the work force, they have historically made up a disproportionate number of the country's poorest citizens.

But since 2000, haredi women's participation in the labour market has climbed by 30 percent. Seventy-five percent of them now have jobs, in line with the country's overall female population.

Evolving roles

According to a survey last year by the Israel Democracy Institute think-tank, haredi women are becoming increasingly qualified and their role inside their communities is evolving.

Meirav, 27, who preferred not to give her surname, is head of customer relations at Comax and has two young children, aged four years and nine months.

She wears the wig customary among ultra-Orthodox wives, who are forbidden to display their own hair in public, but she also lives the life of a modern working woman.

"My husband helps me a lot," she said.

"He takes care of the children, he does the cooking. He takes the kids to childcare and the nursery school so I can get to work on time."

Her spouse, like many haredi men, is in full-time religious study and Meirav is happy to be the family breadwinner "for as long as possible".

Sociology professor Menachem Friedman, a specialist on haredi society, said that in "an abnormal division" of family roles, women there have always worked and simultaneously cared for many children to allow their husbands to devote themselves solely to religious study.

In recent years, traditional areas of employment for haredi women such as childcare, education and administrators in religious institutions have become saturated, he said, leading job-seekers to turn to firms in the secular marketplace.

Providing a suitable workplace

That is bound to have a cultural impact, Friedman said.

"Even if they claim otherwise, it is not possible that women working in a non-religious environment will not sooner or later be influenced."

Women in the haredi world observe strict "modesty" rules, which stipulate long sleeves and skirts and muted colours.

They are forbidden from being alone with a man who is not their husband or a close relative.

They are considered to be the pillar of the family, tasked with raising the children, keeping house and also providing an income.

"They defend the ideal imposed by their community of Torah (Jewish scripture) study by men, but that does not mean they actually subscribe to this narrative," Friedman said.

"Especially when they work in a non-religious environment and are aware of the abnormality of division of household tasks."

A significant number of hi-tech companies have chosen to hire haredi hands, encouraged by generous state subsidies as an incentive for ultra-Orthodox to join the labour force and not rely on welfare.

In addition, haredi workers are prepared to accept lower-than-average wages as a tradeoff for being given working conditions suited to their lifestyle.

At Comax, where the ultra-Orthodox make up nearly a third of the workforce and 90 percent of its computer programmers, senior

management has had to make changes to the workplace.

It helped that joint CEO Yitzhak Bier is an Orthodox Jew—albeit not haredi—and is familiar with religious laws.

Frequent maternity leave

"When we opened up, a rabbi came to inspect everything, checking in particular that all doors were glass so that men and women could not be alone together," said his partner Moti Frenkel.

With the high haredi birthrate, Comax needed to take on enough employees to allow for frequent maternity leave, hiring five [women](#) to fill two to three full-time posts.

"They are very accommodating, which... allows me to work," said Talia, 27, her hair covered by a headscarf.

The company understands the intricacies of religious dietary law, observance of holy days and the demands of family, she added.

"When we need time for the children, they understand that too."

Bier said his haredi employees have a sense of confidence in him.

He cited the case of one who ahead of the solemn Jewish day of atonement—Yom Kippur—asked by email for him to forgive her mistakes of the past year.

"I understood exactly what she wanted because I myself am religious," he said.

"I replied, according to the conventions of the ultra-Orthodox world,

forgiving her three times, and the case was closed."

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