

Employing Women Immigrants from France in Israeli French-Speaking Companies: Honey Trap or Safety Net?

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Abstract

This study focuses on the employment experience of French immigrant women working in French-speaking service companies in Israel (most of them call centers). We asked whether this employment pattern represents an opportunity for the French women immigrants (“safety net”) or a barrier (“honey trap”). To answer this question, we interviewed 31 French women immigrants employed at French-speaking call centers and conducted interviews with the managers of five call centers. Our study points to several themes, revealing the call centers as a necessary income source that also offers flexible work conditions, defines norms of emotional behavior, blurs the lines between secular and sacred, and serves as a community center. In addition, our study reveals that French immigrant women working in call centers express ambivalent attitudes toward their workplace and are aware of the complexity arising to their work pattern. It appears that while in the short term the transnational employment pattern presented in this study fulfills an economic, communal and social need for the immigrants, in the long run it may hinder their integration into the Hebrew-speaking job market.

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Introduction

The number of immigrants from France to Israel has increased dramatically in recent years, reaching a peak of over 7,000 in 2015. The number subsequently dropped to about 5,000 in 2016 and fewer than 4,000 in 2017 (CBS, 2017). A significant percentage of the immigrants from France are between the ages 18-65, and can thus be expected to join the Israeli workforce. According to recent studies, although these immigrants come from a Western country and may be classified as skilled migrants, they face challenges in integrating into the Israeli labor market.¹

This study focuses on a relatively new development closely linked to this in the Israeli employment landscape: work in companies located in Israel that provide services in French to French-speaking communities abroad. Most of these are service centers offering relatively flexible employment conditions, making them attractive to women immigrants from France. However, the call centers are also relatively unstable. In most cases, employment at these centers is temporary, with almost no prospect for advancement. In addition, call center representatives must speak fluent, native French. These requirements transform the call centers into a cultural and social enclave, which can either preserve the French

¹ Karin Amit, Shirly Bar-Lev, “The formation of transnational identity among French immigrants employed in French-speaking companies in Israel,” *International Migration* 54/3 (2016): 110-124.

immigrants' foreignness and prevent them from integrating into the Israeli job market, or afford them the tools necessary to advance their integration.²

We analyze the experiences of 31 French women immigrants working at French-speaking call service centers, with a view to deciding whether this employment pattern represents an opportunity for them or a barrier. We study the women's perceptions related to their labor market experience and the difficulties they face, and try to assess how structural conditions shape their subjective responses. In this respect, the study responds to the growing interest in immigrant women's experience at work.

Research in immigration and labor indicates different coping strategies for immigrant men and women. In the present study, we show how women immigrants from France who are employed at French-speaking call centers have chosen to position themselves in the labor market. While we recognize the low quality of this employment pattern, which offers poorly remunerated jobs in nonstandard forms of employment, we also note that the call centers offer some positive opportunities for immigrant women.³ Based on the different individual employment experiences of these immigrant women, we aim to uncover how the unique characteristics of the French-speaking call center serve to reinforce these women's sense of belonging and facilitate the formulation of their own sense of national and religious identity.

Women's Employment and Social Compensation

Women immigrants are clearly key figures in global migration movements.⁴ Lippi-Green⁵ encourages the study of the gendered effects of migration, namely, how migration affects gender roles both in the labor market and at home. In this study, we ask how migration affects women's career choices and trajectories. We

² *Ibid.*

³ Sigal Nagar-Ron, Einat Lachover, "Special issue. Feminist perspectives about work", *Hagar: International Social Studies Review* 11/2 (2014).

⁴ Stephen Castels, Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2013); Uzi Rebhun, "Immigration, gender, and earnings in Israel," *European Journal of Population/Revue européenne de Démographie* 26/1 (2010): 73-97; Katharine M. Donato et al., "Social Science Research Council. A glass half full? Gender in migration studies," *International Migration Review* 40/1 (2006): 3-26.

⁵ Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an accent. Language, ideology and discrimination in the United States*, (London – New York: Routledge, 2012).

do so by contextualizing the employment choices of female immigrants of French descent in the Israeli online services market, operated via the internet and telephone.

Most studies of female immigrant labor have focused on uneducated women employed in low-skilled jobs.⁶ They have presented evidence of the double disadvantage of these women in the labor market due to their being both women and immigrants.⁷ But globalization processes have led to the emergence of new employment patterns based on communications and advanced information technologies, with the new jobs requiring higher level skills. One key example of the new patterns of employment is service centers that operate using the telephone and internet (call centers). These jobs are characterized by flexible and convenient conditions (minimal hours, close to home) that encourage the active participation of women, particularly immigrants.⁸

Gender studies literature indicates a paradox in connection with the change that is taking place in women's status in global employment.⁹ On the one hand, women are penetrating fields to which they had little or no access in the past, thus reducing the gender gap in the employment market. On the other hand, women's employment today still suffers from structural disadvantages that substantially impact women's ability to plan for their financial future.¹⁰ According to Yuval-Davis,¹¹ these patterns reinforce gender differences in the job market.

⁶ Jose C. Moya, "Domestic service in a global perspective. Gender, migration, and ethnic niches," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33/4 (2007): 558-579.

⁷ Rebeca Raijman, Moshe Semyonov, "Gender, ethnicity, and immigration. Double disadvantage and triple disadvantage among recent immigrant women in the Israeli labor market," *Gender & Society* 11/1 (1997): 108-125.

⁸ Donato et al., "Social Science Research Council."

⁹ *Ibid.*; Nira Yuval-Davis, "Women, globalization and contemporary politics of belonging," *Gender, Technology and Development* 13/1 (2009): 1-19.

¹⁰ Orly Benjamin, "Gender research in Israel in the context of accelerating neoliberalization and effort to challenge it," *Gender* 1 (2012): 23-42; Orly Benjamin, "The Narratives of New Public Management in an International and Israeli Perspective and the Gendered Political Economy of Care Work," Special issue on *Care. Work, Relations, Regimes, Soziale Welt* 20 (2014): 253-268.

¹¹ Yuval-Davis, "Women, globalization and contemporary politics of belonging."

Employment at French-speaking call centers should be considered in light of the opportunities and barriers presented by the Israeli job market.¹² In 2012, the labor force participation rate of Israeli Jewish men stood at about 83%, while the rate for Israeli Jewish women was 86% (a relatively high figure compared with European countries).¹³ The liberalization of the Israeli job market in the early 2000s consisted of wage reductions and massive layoffs, especially in the public sector workforce. It curtailed benefits and transfer payments, especially child benefits, unemployment compensation and income support, and the adoption of stricter eligibility guidelines.¹⁴ The expansion of the service industries, particularly in the public sector, enlarged employment opportunities for Israeli women. However, recent global economic crises have resulted in higher job instability for both Israeli men and women. Highly skilled men and women can experience unemployment for prolonged periods of time, as well as frequent switching between jobs. These disrupted work patterns characterize women's employment more than men's.¹⁵ Despite increasing liberalization of the Israeli job market, men's employment remains more stable than women's, thus affording men higher rewards than women from formal employment. Men's salaries are higher, and they have more opportunities for advancement and access to lucrative jobs.¹⁶

Call centers are a good example of how communication and information technologies are expanding employment opportunities for immigrant women, as well as changing traditional attitudes toward place and time in the working world. Most of the centers act as service contractors – they employ call representatives through short-term employment contracts and “irregular”

¹² Galit Aharon, “Gender careers in Israel and their effect on salary,” *Israeli Sociology* 18/1 (2016): 31-55.

¹³ Benjamin Bental, Vered Kraus, Yuval Yonay, “Ethnic and gender earning gaps in a liberalized economy. The case of Israel,” *Social science research* 63 (2017): 209-226; Patricia B. Barger, Alicia Ann Grandey, “Service with a smile and encounter satisfaction. Emotional contagion and appraisal mechanisms,” *Academy of Management Journal* 49/6 (2006): 1229-1238.

¹⁴ Mimi Ajzenstadt, “Moral panic and neo-liberalism. The case of single mothers on welfare in Israel,” *The British Journal of Criminology* 49/1 (2008): 68-87.

¹⁵ Aharon, “Gender careers in Israel and their effect on salary.”

¹⁶ Francine D. Blau et al., “The declining significance of gender?,” in *The Declining Significance of Gender?*, eds. Francine D. Blau et al., (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 3-34; Haya Stier, Yaish Meir, “Occupational segregation and gender inequality in job quality. A multi-level approach,” *Work, employment and society* 28/2 (2014): 225-246.

employment formats.¹⁷ This employment pattern enables the immigrants, most of whom (about 80%) are women who speak no or poor Hebrew, to integrate quickly into the Israeli labor market using the language and cultural skills that they acquired in their origin country. In a similar pattern, ultra-Orthodox and Arab women are employed with relatively low salaries in the high-tech industry in Israel.¹⁸ In their research, Whittock et al.¹⁹ assert that partial employment of this type can prove to be a “honey trap,” as it ultimately prevents women from improving their Hebrew and advancing professionally.

As noted, French-speaking call centers in Israel provide services to customers in many French-speaking countries. The fate of these companies is significantly affected by fluctuations in the French economy as well as by French labor laws and regulations. Besides displaying a service mentality and persuasive ability, call center representatives are expected to speak native French and to convey the impression that the caller is in France. In addition to accent training, other methods of “de-Israelizing” employees at French-speaking call centers might involve management-imposed requirements to adopt non-Jewish French names and mask the call center’s location.²⁰ The masking provides a valuable context for our study of nested and cross-cultural identities at work.²¹ Even more specific to our study’s objectives, these “communication events,” involving strict boundary-setting processes, offer immigrant women opportunities reflectively to construct their own sense of Israeli identity.

¹⁷ Orly Benjamin, Rona Goclaw, “Narrating the power of non-standard employment. The case of the Israeli public sector,” *Journal of Management Studies* 42/4 (2005): 737-759.

¹⁸ Gadi Algazi, “Matrix at Bil’in. A story of colonial capitalism in contemporary Israel,” *Theory and Criticism* 29 (2006): 173-191 [Hebrew].

¹⁹ Margaret Whittock et al. “‘The tender trap’. Gender, part-time nursing and the effects of ‘family-friendly’ policies on career advancement,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 24/3 (2002): 305-326.

²⁰ Raka Shome, “Thinking through the diaspora. Call centers, India, and a new politics of hybridity,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9/1 (2006): 105-124; Premilla D’Cruz, Ernesto Noronha, “Doing emotional labour. The experiences of Indian call centre agents,” *Global Business Review* 9/1 (2008): 131-147; Vandana Nath, “Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma. National identity management and racial abuse in offshored Indian call centres,” *Work, employment and society* 25/4 (2011): 709-725.

²¹ Diya Das, Ravi Dharwadkar, Pamela Brandes, “The importance of being Indian. Identity centrality and work outcomes in an off-shored call center in India,” *Human Relations* 61/11 (2008): 1499-1530.

Immigrants from France

In recent years, the number of French immigrants to Israel has risen significantly, reaching a peak of over 7000 in 2015. In the past three years, the number of new arrivals dropped to around 4500 immigrants from France per year, a rate which remains significant when compared to other immigrant groups. Yet despite growing public interest in the Jewish community of France and its immigrants to Israel, academic research on this population remains sparse.²²

According to Cohen's studies,²³ several factors push the Jews to emigrate from France: the increase in anti-Semitic incidents and terror attacks targeting Jews and fear for continued Jewish existence in France; concern over the aggressive attitudes that certain circles in France (such as its large Muslim population) display toward Israel due to its policies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and difficulties experienced by the French and European economy in the past decade. Research on French immigrants in Israel, mainly based on immigrant surveys, shows that the main motives for immigration are Zionist and religious.²⁴ Fear of anti-Semitism, although emphasized in the Israeli media, is not indicated in the surveys by the immigrants themselves as a significant motive. However, this finding must be qualified, as it may be explained by immigrants' rationalization following immigration and their desire to emphasize the pull (positive) motives for immigration to Israel.²⁵ The studies also show that immigrants from France are characterized by higher than average levels of education and lifestyle, and most define themselves as traditional or religious.²⁶ In a recently published

²² Erik H. Cohen, *The Jews of France at the Turn of the Third Millennium. A Sociological and Cultural analysis*, (The Rappaport Center: Bar Ilan University, 2009); Id., *The Jews of France Today. Identity and Values*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Sergio Della Pergola, "Jews in Europe. Demographic trends, contexts and outlooks," in *Jewish Experience in Unifying Europe*, eds. Julius H. Schoeps, Olaf Glojner, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3-34; Karin Amit, Shirly Bar-Lev, "Immigrants' sense of belonging to the host country. The role of life satisfaction, language proficiency, and religious motives," *Social Indicators Research* 124/3 (2015): 947-961; Karin Amit, Shirly Bar-Lev, "The formation of transnational identity among French immigrants employed in French-speaking companies in Israel," *International Migration* 54/3 (2016): 110-124.

²³ Cohen, *The Jews of France at the Turn of the Third Millennium*; Id., *The Jews of France Today. Identity and Values*.

²⁴ Karin Amit, "Life satisfaction of immigrants who come to Israel from Western countries," *Hagira* 1 (2012): 80-97 [Hebrew].

²⁵ Sergio Della Pergola et al., "The Six-Day War and Israel-Diaspora relations. An analysis of quantitative indicators," in *The Six-Day War and World Jewry*, ed. Eli Lederhendler, (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 11-50.

²⁶ Amit, "Life satisfaction of immigrants who come to Israel from Western countries."

book, Ben Rafael & Ben Rafael show that French immigrants tend to live in ethnic communities in major cities (Jerusalem, Netanya, Ashdod), and that they share several characteristics in common, lending them a homogeneous aspect as a group: most are educated, middle class, religiously observant and of North African origin.²⁷

Studies of the integration of French immigrants into the Israeli job market indicate that they are very active economically (98%), especially in comparison with other immigrant groups from Western countries (North Americans – 79%, other Europeans – 61%, according to Pupko²⁸). In terms of their socio-economic status, French immigrants resemble those that came from North America.²⁹ However, as English speakers, immigrants from North America find it easier to integrate into the Israeli job market, due to the global nature of the Israeli economy and the dominance of English in the international market. In addition, the Israeli government recognizes North American credentials in many professions, thus allowing immigrants to continue working in their field. By comparison, highly skilled French immigrants face more difficulties in obtaining Israeli government recognition for their professional credentials and academic diplomas. French immigrants in Israel are often asked to undergo long and demanding certification processes, and in Hebrew. For many of the French immigrants, this obstacle is insurmountable. Thus, many French immigrants feel that their economic status has worsened in Israel.³⁰ In addition, many maintain a strong connection to their country of origin (through physical employment in France or employment in French in Israel).

A recent study based on a survey of 355 immigrants from France examines issues related to their integration into the Israeli job market.³¹ At the time of the survey, some 70% of the respondents were working as salaried employees, while 22% were independently employed. Of the salaried employees who participated in the survey (188 immigrants), 48% reported that the dominant language spoken

²⁷ Eliezer Ben-Rafael, Miriam Ben-Rafael, *Sociologie et sociolinguistique des francophonies israéliennes*, (Frankfurt, Berlin, New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

²⁸ Israel Pupko, *Multi-local Aliyah. Placing two feet in two places*, (Jerusalem: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2009).

²⁹ Amit, "Life satisfaction of immigrants who come to Israel from Western countries."

³⁰ Pupko, *Multi-local Aliyah. Placing two feet in two places*; Anat Meidan, "French olim struggle to practice their professions in Israel," *Ynetnews*, December 14, 2017, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4945080,00.html>.

³¹ Karin Amit, Shirly Bar-Lev, "Transnational Identity of French Immigrants Employed in French speaking Companies," *Hagira* 4 (2015): 34-52 [Hebrew].

at their workplace was French (most were employed at call centers). The study's findings indicated ethnic isolation of the French immigrants both at work and outside it: French immigrants employed at French-speaking companies live in neighborhoods with a high concentration of French speakers, and most of their friends are French speakers. These immigrants speak poor Hebrew. However, the study found that despite their cultural isolation and without any relation to their job, most of the French immigrants have a strong feeling of belonging to Israeli society. The researchers explained these findings based on the French immigrants' strong Zionist and religious motivation for immigration, and on the fact that most define themselves as connected to the Jewish religion (traditional or religious).

Research Method

This study follows the recommendation of researchers on gender and immigration who assert that qualitative methods lead to significant conclusions regarding the integration of women in job positions through a broader understanding of the context in which they operate.³²

In 2012-2013 and again in 2015, we conducted a series of 31 interviews with women immigrants from France who were living in Israel and were employed at French-speaking call centers. In addition, we held interviews with the managers of 5 call centers that we visited. We contacted the interviewees through a preliminary contact list of 80 French-speaking companies that employ immigrants from France. This list was provided by AMI, a leading non-profit organization providing assistance for French immigrants. We also contacted 5 call centers in Jerusalem and Netanya that employ French immigrants. The first contact was with the general managers and human resources managers at the call centers. We then coordinated visits for on-site observations and interviews with employees.

The age of the interviewees in the study ranged between 23-62 (average 42.7). Most of the interviewees had immigrated to Israel in the first decade of the 21st century, and had been living in Israel for around 10 years. Most came from families that had immigrated to France during the 1950s and 1960s from North

³² Donato, "Social Science Research Council.;" Patricia R. Pessar, "On the homefront and in the workplace. Integrating immigrant women into feminist discourse," *Anthropological Quarterly* 68/1 (1995): 37-47.

Africa (primarily Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco). Some 45% of the interviewees had a higher education. At the time of the interviews, 21 of the interviewees (78%) were employed at French-speaking call centers in Israel. The rest were self-employed or in the process of establishing a business, but had worked at call centers in the past.

The interviews were conducted in French, with the goal of encouraging the interviewees to talk about their employment experience in Israel in a way that would expose their world of personal and subjective meaning.³³ The interpretive paradigm suggests that social action should be analyzed from the actors' standpoint. To gain this type of empathic insight we tried to keep our questions to a minimum, and let the participants invite us into their world. We accordingly structured the interview to include four basic questions. We began by asking the women to share their immigration stories. We then asked them to tell us how they ended up working in the call center. Next, we asked how they experience their work (hardships, amusing anecdotes, work relationships with colleagues and bosses). Finally, we asked them to share their future plans as well as their perspective on their identity as immigrants, mothers, and wives. We identified five central themes that were reiterated by the interviewees: 1) the call center as an income source, 2) display rules and identity management in the French-speaking call center, 3) the call center as a community center, 4) the importance of flexibility at work, and 5) ambivalent attitudes toward the workplace.

To supplement the data obtained from the interviews, we carried out observations at five call centers – three in Jerusalem and two in Netanya. Most of the employees at these companies are women (80%). The work is organized in shifts, and most of the employees work part-time (4 hours per day). At the companies we visited, workdays are Monday through Thursday. The base salary is between 30-50 NIS per hour, not including sales bonuses. The role of the call representatives is to promote and/or sell services or merchandise to individuals or companies in France. The employees go through a training session of several weeks (depending on the company and product sold), during which they learn about the product, the relevant market for this product in France, and the sales process. Each employee is expected to handle an average of 120 calls per day. The

³³ Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, Gabriela Spector-Marzel, "Introduction. Narrative research definitions and contexts," in *Narrative research. Theory, creation and interpretation*, eds. Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, Gabriela Spector-Marzel, (Jerusalem: Magnes and Mofet, 2010), 7-42 [Hebrew].

French customer on the other end of the line usually does not realize that the call is coming from Israel.

Several of the interviewees in our study had worked as call representatives for gambling websites of questionable legality. Perhaps for this reason, some of them were reticent about discussing their workplace. They tended to be vague about the work routine and supplied few details about their work experience at the center. However, most of the interviewees were cooperative.

Findings

Theme 1: The Need to Earn a Living – The Call Center as an Income Source

None of the interviewees perceived their work as a career venue; instead, most asserted that they worked to earn a living. They considered their salaries higher than what they would be offered elsewhere in the Israeli labor market. The call center was often thought of as a temporary solution that mainly served as a convenient, easily accessible source of income. Most of the interviews noted poor command of Hebrew as a main barrier to competing for other jobs in the Israeli labor market. Eva was 35 at the time of the interview, married with two children. She worked at a call center in Jerusalem. She immigrated to Israel in 1997 after completing 13 years of education. Prior to working at a call center, she had worked in a family business which went bankrupt.

I must work – we were thrown into the deep end. We survive thanks to these call centers. We need them. If these companies didn't exist, we wouldn't survive here... Maybe I should look for a job in Hebrew. I can speak, but writing is hard for me.³⁴

Eva acknowledges her poor Hebrew as a significant barrier in searching for other employment and is thus appreciative of the opportunity offered by the call centers to earn a living.

Clariss is single, 32 years old, and lives in Tel Aviv. She immigrated to Israel ten years prior to our interview. At the age of 18, she felt she was "too religious to serve in the army," so she returned to France, where she participated in the 2012

³⁴ Interview of the first and second Author with Eva, Jerusalem, December, 2012.

protests against anti-Semitism. Eventually she returned to Israel. She also recognizes the benefits of working in a call center, but is overwhelmed by its disadvantages:

At some point, I thought of working in a [gambling] call center to make money. But I know it is a bit of a scam. And you have to make calls, which is off-putting. The people who work there hate it. They do it only to earn money. Apart from that, it adds to their stress. You are sitting in your small cubicle, cut off from everyone, and you have to call people for hours and be productive. It's hard... I am in Israel. If I don't learn Hebrew, I will not be able to work at a [good] company. And I am almost done with my studies.³⁵

Muriel arrived in Israel in 2010. She is a wife and the mother of an 18-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old son. Settled in Ashdod, Muriel describes herself as a Shabbat and Kashrut observer. When asked, "How would you describe your workday?" she responded:

I wanted to keep busy. I wanted to earn a living [*parnassah*]. I asked myself what I could do. I refused to retake the accreditation exam. I got an offer from a call center. I chose the easy path: To work in an office, answer the phone. I am well paid. And here I am a year later... I am not excited about the job, but it is a living.³⁶

The women interviewed maintained a practical attitude to working in a call center. An instrumental or a sensible approach to work is aligned with the vocational discourse predominant in certain religious circles,³⁷ in which women are encouraged to seek employment in the community while also tending to their children, thus freeing their husbands to study Torah in a Kollel or Yeshiva. In this context, discourse of self-fulfillment and empowerment is often frowned

³⁵ Interview of research assistant with Claris, Tel-Aviv, February, 2013.

³⁶ Interview of research assistant with Muriel, Ashdod, December, 2012

³⁷ Liat Kulik, "Explaining Employment Hardiness Among Women in Israel's Ultraorthodox Community: Facilitators and Inhibitors," *Journal of Career Assessment* 24/1 (2016): 67-85; Azi Lev-On, Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, "To browse, or not to browse? Third person effect among Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women, in regards to the perceived danger of the internet," in *New media and intercultural communication. Identity, community, and politics*, eds. Pauline Hope Cheong, Judith N. Martin, Leah Pauline Macfadyen, (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 223-236.

upon.³⁸ This norm may explain why the women we interviewed rarely expressed a sense of pride in their work, nor openly celebrated their many accomplishments. However, the way they constructed their stories implied a general sense of self-sufficiency and a belief in their ability to influence important aspects of their lives. In many of the stories, men (usually their husbands) were mentioned only in passing. Often, the speaker's perseverance would come to the fore immediately following details of her husband's failure to provide adequately for the family. Muriel's story is most illustrative:

My husband wanted to integrate into the Israeli job market. He spoke basic Hebrew. He was unemployed for so long that it caused a lot of tension with the children and with me. He worked at a supermarket, in the fruits and vegetables section. He stayed one week: he said it was laborious. He said that the bosses mistreated him. He left and started working as a security guard in a parking lot. He figured he didn't need to talk much in this type of a job... but he didn't keep that job either. He then worked at a call center. The conditions there were harsh. He was bored. Some friends launched another call center. It paid much better than an 'immigrant job' in the Israeli labor market. However, remaining in the French-speaking market did not improve his Hebrew. He managed to stay with this call center for 14 months. But the job did not give him what he wanted anymore. He left. Now he is trying another call center. So, I thought to myself, where can I work to help?³⁹

Nava works at a call center in Natanya. She immigrated with her husband and three children eight years prior to this interview.

I had to fight with the school administration, so they would not put my child in an 'Olim class. I wanted her to mix with Israelis. And I did it!!!! She is now in Shnat Sherut at Misrad Habitahon (doing national service for the state security office). With my son, it was a nightmare. They stuck him in an all 'Olim class and forgot him there. School ends at 14:00, and I had to work. My husband did not speak a word of Hebrew. He was a hairdresser in France, but here he couldn't converse with the clients. He ended up in a call center. But it was too much for him. We thought this

³⁸ Rivka Neriya-Ben Shahar, "For we ascend in holiness and do not descend.' Jewish ultra-Orthodox women's agency through their discourse about media," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18/2 (2019): 212-226.

³⁹ Interview of research assistant with Muriel, Ashdod, December, 2012.

job would last till retirement, but he keeps moving from one call center to another... I am very professional. I speak nicely to the customers, and I know my job.⁴⁰

Again, Nava describes her determination in stark opposition to her husband's ineffectualness. For others, the men in their lives were an absent presence. Isabel immigrated to Israel in the early 1990s. She arrived with a nine-month-old baby, and soon thereafter she and her husband opened a restaurant, which failed. Eight years prior to the interview, her husband left her with three grown children:

I have been working at call centers for eight years now. He comes and goes, but I provide for my family. My son still lives with me. But now that he is 21, I can work 140 hours a week non-stop. I try to put in as many hours as I can. I stop only for lunch. The rules are not made to accommodate single mothers and their children, but I manage.⁴¹

The women composed their stories as series of banalities. Yet subtly they each told a story of successful coping with obstacles that emerge on both the work and the home fronts. Nevertheless, the identity they put forward is a complex one – their work identities must complement their identities as dedicated mothers and wives, as per the dictates of religious discourse concerning women's employment.

Theme 2: The Importance of Flexibility at Work

For most of the women working at call centers, employment flexibility was very important. This was needed to allow young mothers to raise their children without needing a paid childcare arrangement. For the older women, flexible work hours enabled them to help take care of their grandchildren, attend religious classes, do housework and even work a second job. Charlene is a single mother who immigrated to Israel in 1997. She was 30 at the time of the interview, a widowed mother of three, and had completed 13 years of schooling. She was employed at a call center in Jerusalem:

After the children were born, it was easier to work at jobs for the French. They gave me half-day shifts and I earned well. I don't work on Sundays,

⁴⁰ Interview of research assistant with Nava, Ashdod, January, 2013.

⁴¹ Interview of research assistant with Isabel, Ashdod, January, 2013.

nor on Fridays or Saturdays. With the bonuses, I can earn up to NIS 7000. Not bad for four hours of work per day. It works for me.⁴²

Barbara immigrated to Israel in 2007. She describes herself as an observant Jew. At the time of the interview she was 44, married with three children, and had an MBA. She was employed at a call center in Netanya.

In Israel, I studied at an ulpan (Hebrew immersion program). But the first year was very difficult – a year of depression. I cried constantly. I felt helpless in dealing with the education system... I started working here 5 1/2 years ago. It was hard to go back to work. I had no choice, because I don't speak Hebrew and I had to find work quickly. I manage with the hours. I've stayed with the company because of the proximity to home and flexible work hours, although the job doesn't pay very well. But that's not the most important thing. My husband couldn't find stable employment. He worked at odd jobs for 25 NIS per hour (he's a computer guy). For the past three years, he has worked at a French-speaking call center. Together, we manage with the kids.⁴³

Anael also emphasizes the importance of flexibility as a significant factor in choosing to work at a call center. In her case, language was not a central factor, as she speaks fluent Hebrew and had worked for Hebrew-speaking companies. Anael immigrated to Israel in 2007. At the time of the interview she was 25, married with two children, and held a BA degree in business management. Yet she chose to work at a call center in Netanya.

I didn't have a problem with the language. I worked for two years at an Israeli finance company in Tel Aviv. After I had my first child, I continued to work until 4 pm. But travelling back and forth every day was exhausting. When my daughter was born, I didn't work for a year, so that I could take care of her. I'm alone, I have no [other] family here... I went back to work just two weeks ago, 4 hours a day. That way is best for the family. This time, I chose to work in French, even though I have no problem in Hebrew, for two reasons: the salary and the flexibility. That's a default, it's not my first choice. We're not talking about personal ambition or career goals. This job is what's there. I would like to find

⁴² Interview of the first and second A. with Charlene, Jerusalem, February, 2013.

⁴³ Interview of the first and second A. with Barbara, Netanya, August, 2015.

another job, but it's hard because of the kids. It's not easy to combine work and family. My first goal is to take care of my kids, to be available for them.⁴⁴

Theme 3: Display Rules and Identity Management at the French-Speaking Call Center

The French-speaking call center maintains norms of emotional displays to instruct workers (mainly women) how to interact with callers in socially acceptable ways. Employees are selected, trained, and monitored for friendly and enthusiastic displays,⁴⁵ so as to ensure customer satisfaction and service quality ratings.⁴⁶

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's seminal study, "The Managed Heart," extended this line of thought by suggesting that emotional control is a variant of social and economic control. She defined "emotional labor" or "emotional work" as the efforts that employees are expected to invest in adopting the company's ideology regarding how they should feel in a variety of situations.⁴⁷ Under this definition, "emotional laborers" are workers who must suppress their emotions in order to sell their company's image. Display rules are the explicit and implicit expectations of emotional expression while at work. These display rules are a key component of emotional labor jobs in which the employee is expected to "produce an emotional state in another person." Through training and supervision, management "exercises a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees."⁴⁸

Arie is 48 years old and married. He immigrated to Israel in 2008, and in 2009 founded a call center in Netanya that provides secretarial services for French

⁴⁴ Interview of research assistant with Anael, Ashdod, January, 2013.

⁴⁵ Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁴⁶ Patricia B. Barger, Alicia Ann Grandey, "Service with a smile and encounter satisfaction. Emotional contagion and appraisal mechanisms," *Academy of Management Journal* 49/6 (2006): 1229-1238; Douglas S. Pugh, "Service with a smile. Emotional contagion in the service encounter," *Academy of Management Journal* 44/5 (2001): 1018-1027.

⁴⁷ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 147; Lori Sideman Goldberg, Alicia Ann Grandey, "Display rules versus display autonomy. Emotion regulation, emotional exhaustion, and task performance in a call center simulation," *Journal of occupational health psychology* 12/3 (2007): 301.

physicians in France. He describes the working conditions and behavioral expectations at his call center:

I employ 10 women, religious and non-religious; some work part time and others full time. Work hours are 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. from Monday to Saturday. In terms of skills, I look for someone who can write and know how to express herself in correct French. She also needs to have a pleasant manner and understand people. The job is very stressful, especially on Monday mornings. Dispatchers must manage 30,000 calls a month, 200 calls a day... Our clients are unaware that we are in Israel. I do not disclose this information. But it is not a problem. Most [French-speaking] call centers operate in North Africa. Our company employs only women – that is preferable in the medical field. All our employees are new immigrants of French descent. The most veteran has been in Israel for ten years, and the newest immigrated to Israel six months ago. Their age ranges from 25 to 60. Five of the women are single mothers. They chose this job because it allows them to work from home. Most live close by in Netanya, but some come from Haifa and Hadera. For educational background, I demand the minimum – a high school diploma... They need to be able to close themselves in a room and interact with a computer the whole day. They don't actually meet or see people. An ideal worker is one that is conscientious and punctual. The expectation is that the women will be polite, pleasant, punctual and articulate. This job is founded on trust. I trust my employees and I do not monitor their response time. I am a little bit like their brother or friend. We have a lot of personal conversations. They share their personal problems with me. And the women also talk among themselves, because they share the same profile.⁴⁹

Arie's description of the working conditions and job expectations is representative of most call centers we encountered. Arie describes a combination of management techniques, ethical regimens, and administrative systems aimed at making the women employable in transnational service work in the call center industry in Israel. Arie places great emphasis on how the women display their feelings towards customers. This type of emotional display can be described as detached pleasantness. Indeed, as can be deduced from Eveline's and Jessica's statements, the women are well aware of the expectation that they will "act

⁴⁹ Interview of the first and second A. with Arie, Netanya, February, 2013.

pleasant and happy to serve the customer.” Their acting cheerful despite any private misgivings or conflicted feelings they may have is especially striking considering the women’s statements (up front and at the start of most interviews) that this job was not their first pick of career path.

Eveline gives voice to these frustrations. She is 58 years old, immigrated to Israel with her husband in 2011 and works as a medical secretary at a French-speaking call center in Netanya. She also describes herself as an observant Jew.

I didn’t choose this job. Since I speak no Hebrew, I had trouble finding employment, and this is what I could get. I work 35 hours per week. It requires no real training and it is not a difficult job. All I need to do is speak fluent French, write properly and be polite. [The customers] want adequate responses to their queries. They are not interested in us as individuals. We are numbers to them. There is no human aspect to this job. We mean nothing to them. We are expected to be responsive and pleasant, otherwise they get upset. I am certain that if my customer is a French-speaking Muslim originally from North Africa, he wouldn’t like knowing that the call center is situated in Israel and not in a suburb of Paris.⁵⁰

Jessica works at the same call center. She is 28, married, also immigrated to Israel in 2011, and describes herself as religiously observant. Her account echoes Eveline’s experience.

I am not here by choice. I simply do not speak enough Hebrew to pursue a career in optics, which is what I studied in France. I schedule doctor appointments and relay messages. The most important thing is not to make mistakes. We need to comply with the doctors’ orders and not confuse the appointment books. We need to be meticulous, quick, punctual and responsive. We need to want to help people. We are the only ones connecting the patients with the doctors. It is very important that we sound like Parisian French... Telling the patients that we are in Israel can cause problems... because of politics. We work with patients who are not necessarily Jewish. Customers want to be helped by a

⁵⁰ Interview of research Assistant with Eveline, Netanya, February, 2013.

Frenchwoman and think that this is a French service. It doesn't bother me. All I need to do is be polite and responsive.⁵¹

While emotional self-regulation is common to most service jobs, the non-traditional work arrangements at the French-speaking call center create new forms of emotional labor – one that centers on the management of identity.⁵² French-speaking center managers place a high value on the linguistic abilities of employees and require that they either emulate Parisian accents or “neutralize” their own during customer interaction.⁵³ Poster⁵⁴ has cumulatively termed the accent alteration and name and location masking demands as “national identity management,” designed either to manage customer disillusionment about dealing with offshore centers or to buffer agents from abuse.⁵⁵

Nadine spoke about a slip-up in masking her real identity. She is 73 years old, an ultra-Orthodox widow who lives in Jerusalem. She immigrated to Israel in 2001, and works at a call center that books enrichment courses for professionals

“When I first started out, I didn’t realize that we had to be able to converse about daily affairs in France. There was a big blizzard in France, and electricity was out for three days. The streets were covered with snow. People were shut in at home... I called a client and asked her why she hadn’t called to schedule lessons. She was shocked. She said, ‘Don’t you know that the phones were out of service?’ How was I to know that I had to read the French newspaper every morning before I came in to work? From then on, I make sure to update myself on current events in France. I always check the weather reports [laughs].”⁵⁶

Esther was the only interviewee who spoke about the difficulty of reconciling the organizational demand to conceal her Jewish identity and her newly found sense of Jewishness in Israel. She described herself as an observant Jew; she had

⁵¹ Interview of the first and second A. with Jessica, Netanya, August, 2015.

⁵² Batia M. Wiesenfeld et al., “Organizational identification among virtual workers. The role of need for affiliation and perceived work-based social support,” *Journal of Management* 27/2 (2001): 213-229.

⁵³ Nath, “Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma.”

⁵⁴ Winifred R. Poster, “Who’s on the line? Indian call center agents pose as Americans for US-outsourced firms,” *Industrial Relations. A Journal of Economy and Society* 46/2 (2007): 271-304.

⁵⁵ Premilla D’Cruz, Ernesto Noronha, “Experiencing depersonalised bullying. A study of Indian call-centre agents,” *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* 3/1 (2009): 26-46.

⁵⁶ Interview of the first and second A. with Nadine, Jerusalem, December, 2012.

immigrated to Israel seven years prior to the interview. Esther began her interview by describing her reasons for immigration:

I could not picture myself living in France. I lived in a neighborhood that experienced many anti-Semitic incidents. I always told myself that I should leave. I never felt that France was my home... Observant Jews in France are not considered patriotic. Santa Claus never visited my home, and I remember that I was disappointed. He visited my cousin – they were secular. So, my mother told us that Santa Claus does not visit Jews. She could not say that he did not exist, because she was scared that we'd repeat what she said... I worked a bit in France. I guess the difference is that we are all Jewish. We do not need to ask a special favor of our boss to let us take off on Saturday. We have Shabbat and Fridays off. In France, you had to fight for it [to take Shabbat off].⁵⁷

She then explained how her work at the French-speaking center conflicts with her national identity:

The call center is an income, which is very hard to come by in Israel. My job is not a career, but a temporary solution. In the long run, it interferes with our attempts to integrate in Israeli society. I have to wish callers 'Merry Christmas,' and though it does not lessen my observance and I know how to separate my job from my home life, it bothers me.⁵⁸

Masking their true national identity calls for the use of perfected social skills during interaction on the part of the women, and therefore can expand the range of emotional experiences and accompanying emotional exertion.⁵⁹ Conforming to management-imposed requirements of masking employee identities so that the interaction experience is pleasing to customers is expected to yield high levels of stress, depression,⁶⁰ emotional dissonance and burnout.⁶¹ However, Esther's

⁵⁷ Interview of the first and second A. with Esther, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

⁵⁸ Interview of the first and second A. with Esther, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

⁵⁹ Nath, "Aesthetic and emotional labour through stigma." Agata Gluszek, John F. Dovidio, "The way they speak. A social psychological perspective on the stigma of nonnative accents in communication," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14/2 (2010): 214-237.

⁶⁰ Sharon C. Bolton, Carol Boyd, "Trolley dolly or skilled emotion manager? Moving on from Hochschild's managed heart," *Work, employment and society* 17/2 (2003): 289-308; Dana Yagil, "When the customer is wrong. A review of research on aggression and sexual harassment in service encounters," *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 13/2 (2008): 141-152.

comment is not representative of the other women we interviewed, none of whom reported experiencing the demands of identity aestheticization as stressful, abusive or degrading. On the contrary, it appears that the daily interaction with French customers allows the women to construct unique identities, and to assert and maintain a sense of belonging to the here and now that is Israel. They transform the call center into a socially and symbolically bounded locale where they can construct and rehearse new national identities as Israelis. The call center becomes a “backstage” – clearly bounded social terrain through which the women enact a sense of belonging.⁶² The women thus navigate between their former French identity and their newly acquired identity as Israelis.

The first step in this process is to put some distance between themselves and their French customers. They proceed to define social boundaries by drawing stark distinctions between the Israelis and the French. Nadine’s co-worker Sarah is about 50 years old, and immigrated to Israel in 2011. She is a divorced single mother.

I love being around Israelis. They are not polite. But for me, politeness is not the most important quality in a person. Israelis live in a country that must fight all the time. They struggle. It toughens them. The French are soft. They’ve never had to fight for anything.⁶³

Julia immigrated to Israel in 2006. She is 50 years old. Despite friends and family advising her to postpone her immigration, she insisted on moving to Israel in the middle of the Second Lebanon War. When asked what makes her feel Israeli, Julia commented:

In France, I think people are polite but hypocritical. They don’t give a damn about you. Here, people are crude and harsh but very warm. The French are more individualistic. We lived in a kind of ghetto in France.

⁶¹ Grandey Alicia, Glenda M. Fisk, “Display rules and strain in service jobs: what’s fairness got to do with it?” in *Exploring Interpersonal Dynamics (Research in Occupational Stress and Well Being, Vol. 4)*, eds. Pamela Perrew, Daniel C. Ganster, (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2004), 265-293.

⁶² Erving Goffman, “Role distance,” in *Life as theatre. A dramaturgical sourcebook*, eds. Dennis Brissett, Charles Edgley, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1961[2005]), 101-111; Galit Ailon, *Global ambitions and local identities. An Israeli-American high tech merger*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007).

⁶³ Interview of the first and second A. with Sarah, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

Now, even though I associate only with French-speaking people, I don't feel like I'm in a ghetto.⁶⁴

Oriella is 40 years old. She immigrated to Israel in 1995 and works at a call center in Tel Aviv. She describes herself as traditional Sephardic. She speaks with great passion of her family's decision to leave France and immigrate to Israel.

I am not a foreigner at all. I feel Israeli. I felt Israeli even before I came to Israel! But, still, I cannot deny my French origin. After all, I lived in France for 35 years. However, I never felt French. I always thought of myself as Jewish first and then French. I love Paris deeply as an architectural and cultural city...French culture was once something to admire, but in the last 20 years French culture as I knew and loved it has become extinct. There is no more French culture. My parents are cosmopolitan, and I always felt in between cultures. Still, for my mother, leaving her flat in France was devastating. I felt nothing... I visit France as a tourist. France today is not the France of my childhood. Then, we could live with our differences. I became aware of anti-Semitism very early. But France had values, cultural diversity, and creativity. Now France lives on its past 300 years of glory. There is nothing left of its greatness: cinema, literature, music... nothing. Even fashion and perfume – the big French companies have been bought by Americans.⁶⁵

Our interviewees express a deep sense of disappointment with the French people for failing to protect them against the growing wave of anti-Semitic violence in France. Beyond feeling that the French have abandoned them, they feel that the French Republic has betrayed its ideals of patriotism, secularism, and security. Their sentiments echo public statements made by Jewish community leaders such as Roger Cukierman, president of the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions, who has stated that Jews have been living in France for 2,000 years and have been full citizens since 1791. Yet now they feel that they are looked upon as second-class citizens. In France, the historic source of liberty, equality and fraternity, Jews are now struggling to maintain their safety and security in the face of rising radical Islamist violence.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Interview of the research assistance with Julia, Tel-Aviv, August, 2012.

⁶⁵ Interview of the research assistance with Oriella, Tel Aviv, August, 2012.

⁶⁶ James McAuley, "In France, an uncertain future for Jews," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/in-france-an-uncertain-future-for->

In 2014, the newly elected chief rabbi of France accused French society of being apathetic about anti-Semitism. He also stated that the large number of Jews leaving France for Israel that year partly reflected a delayed reaction to the 2012 killing of four Jews and three soldiers by an Islamist terrorist.⁶⁷ In the next section, we explain why this type of emotional separation was pertinent to the immigrants' construction of a solid Jewish Israeli identity while maintaining a cultural affinity to French culture and French values of humanism and liberalism. This hybrid Franco-Israeli-Jewish identity was supported and encouraged by the owners and managers of the call centers.

Theme 4: Blurring the Lines between Secular and Sacred – The Call Center as a Community Center

In his seminal book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson claims that “communities are to be distinguished by the style in which they are imagined.”⁶⁸ He goes on to note that imagined communities are characterized by three key identifiers: elastic boundaries, identification rituals and a deep sense of camaraderie. We argue that by turning the call center into a place where religious practices such as communal prayer, candle lighting and Torah study can take place, managements and employees display their new identities. Myerhoff coined the term “definitional ceremony” to denote a group ritual by whose means a group informs itself and all around it of its existence and its identity.⁶⁹ Myerhoff claims that definitional ceremonies are of the utmost importance to groups of immigrants who have lost their connection to their past culture and whose lives proceed in a world of “strangers.”⁷⁰

jews/2016/05/07/7b6e2e8c-12e8-11e6-a9b5-bf703a5a7191_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1f8aae439179

⁶⁷ “French society seemingly apathetic to anti-Semitism, says chief rabbi,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 16, 2014. <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/French-society-seemingly-apatetic-to-anti-Semitism-says-chief-rabbi-375504>

⁶⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (London: Verso Books, 1986), 6.

⁶⁹ Barbara Myerhoff, “Rites of passage. Process and paradox,” in *Celebration. Studies in festivity and ritual*, ed. Victor Turner, (Washington, D.C : Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 109-135, II.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; Rachel Sharaby, “Significance of Prenuptial Rituals as Ethnic Definitional Ceremonies among Immigrants,” *Advances in Anthropology* 7/2 (2017): 55-78.

While distancing themselves morally and ethically from the French (customers and, more broadly, the French people), the women enacted a locally bounded sense of belonging. They spoke of their colleagues and even managers in ways that often suspended occupational, hierarchical or other distinctions among them. Though some of them worked from home and did not regularly meet the women at the call center, most spoke highly of the sense of camaraderie that developed among the workers with whom they shared the call center experience.

At the time of the interview, Sarah had been working at a Jerusalem call center for four months. Her daughter, who had recently given birth to a baby girl, was also working at a French-speaking call center. Sarah speaks of the sisterhood exemplified at the call centers:

My daughter gave birth two weeks ago. Every day, [the women] visit us and bring meals for us to eat. They help each other a lot. They help even those who are not observant. Helping others is very important to them. It's not because they're religious. It is because they have a Jewish spirit. Where else does such a thing exist? Only here in Israel. We laugh with each other, help each other, and work together. I have so many friends here.⁷¹

Laura has tried several types of employment including waitressing, private tutoring, and working at a call center. She now works at a call center for an Israeli manager. In the following passage, she reminisces about a previous call center where her boss was of French descent.

I think I felt more at ease with a French boss. We could talk with him and share what we had in common. This is the first time I have no direct contact with the boss. If I ever meet my former bosses, they would surely say 'hi.' They would certainly remember my name. In the advertising company where I worked, we went to each other's weddings, and celebrated Israel Independence Day together. My first real professional experience was in a very familial environment.⁷²

When asked what she liked about her current employment, Muriel answered:

⁷¹ Interview of the first and second A. with Sarah, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

⁷² Interview of the research assistant with Laura, Tel Aviv, August, 2012.

There is solidarity here – a Jewish spirit that prevails. If there is someone in need, we pray for her, or organize a small fundraiser.⁷³

Eveline immigrated to Israel in 2011. She is 58 years old and works at a French-speaking call center in Netanya.

I don't enjoy this work much. I only do it to keep myself busy. It is not very stimulating intellectually, nor is it economically rewarding. But it has a family atmosphere and the boss is very sympathetic. We communicate so well with each other. I can really share with the other women here. There is good teamwork here. We are very close to one another, and I feel comfortable disclosing intimate details about my life. Every week we go to the beach together.⁷⁴

For most of the women, work at the call center serves a social and communal purpose. For some, the social ties formed at the centers are a substitute for family that have remained in France. The French-Jewish culture they share serves as fertile ground for developing relationships and helping each other. These ties are also very natural as many of the women share a religiously observant lifestyle.

Marcelle immigrated to Israel in 2008. Her style of dress identified her as ultra-Orthodox. At the time of the interview, she was 62, had completed 12 years of schooling, and was working at a call center in Jerusalem.

It's like a family here. There's lots of warmth. I love it. It's not like in France. Here we address each other in the second person familiar form, and that removes lots of barriers. Everyone respects each other, everyone is observant like me. We feel like one people... Yes, I come to work happily, because I feel good. I'm free, I can pray and wear a head covering. I don't have to worry that I might be forced to desecrate the Shabbat or holidays – not like the situation in France. Here people need a second family.⁷⁵

⁷³ Interview of the research assistant with Muriel, Ashdod, December, 2012.

⁷⁴ Interview of the first and second A. with Eveline, Netanya, February, 2013.

⁷⁵ Interview of the first and second A. with Marcelle, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

Most of the women we interviewed described themselves as observing Jewish law. They perceived the observance of *Halachah* (Jewish traditional law) and Jewish customs as a moral imperative, and vehemently rejected conventional Israeli categories such as *Masorti* (traditional), *Dati Leumi* (nationalistic religious), or *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) to describe their type of Jewish religiosity. The vague category of “religiously observant” is general enough to include multiple forms and modalities. For most of the immigrants, living in Israel enables them openly to practice their religion. Covering their hair (for women), observing Shabbat, keeping kosher and taking part in religious ceremonies are publicly practiced and encouraged. In the call centers we observed, the management allowed gender segregation by separating the women’s cubicles from the men’s, and even set aside times and spaces for religious ceremonies. At one company, a glass-fronted bookcase filled with prayer books in French stood at the entrance to the office. These books were printed at the company’s expense and had the company logo on them. Another company placed a similar bookcase in the conference room, where they also held classes on Judaism. At yet another firm, the women set a small donation box next to some memorial candles in the hope of raising money for a recently widowed employee.

This blurring of the lines between sacred and secular in the workplace allows for the consolidation of a unique ethnic identity. Some workplaces (call centers) intentionally nurture this identity to make the job attractive to the ultra-Orthodox men and women who work there. Yael, who immigrated to Israel in 2011, expressed her appreciation of this. At the time of the interview, she was 34, had completed 12 years of education, was married with three children, and worked at a call center in Jerusalem:

I participate in the religious services at work. It’s heartwarming. We follow a way of life based on the Torah. Being among our own brings us closer, it creates stronger ties, more shared experiences (like Pesach cleaning). We share the same concerns.⁷⁶

Many of the women felt they were constantly moving back and forth between the ‘imagined community’ of the call center and Israeli society. They crossed these symbolic gates of their “enclave culture” on a daily basis. With its unique rituals and sense of camaraderie, the call center allowed the women to reinvent themselves as spiritual figures working within the bounds of the traditional

⁷⁶ Interview of the first and second A. with Yael, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

female religious sphere and extending it to the secular sphere of the workplace, as well.⁷⁷ It also allowed them to construct and publicly display a coherent identity where their work activities and work identities complemented those practiced at home.

Theme 5: Ambivalent Attitudes toward the Workplace – “Honey Trap” or Safety Net?

Is work at French-speaking call centers a “honey trap” or a vital safety net for the immigrants from France? The women we interviewed were ambivalent toward the call center’s contribution to their integration in the Israeli labor market in particular and in Israeli society in general. Some argued that the call center, with its flexible hours and the convenience of conversing in their mother tongue, discouraged the immigrants from trying to improve their Hebrew, familiarize themselves with Israeli work culture, and apply and interview for other jobs.

Ilana immigrated to Israel in 2010. At the time of the interview, she was 26, with an MA in communications. She worked at a call center in Tel Aviv. She spoke of the call center as a demotivating factor in looking for better employment

I really didn’t see it happening to me... I looked for work and ended up at a French-speaking call center. I met nice people here. The atmosphere is very pleasant, and familial... French. At the end of the month my earnings are not bad, considering the hours I’ve worked. And that’s really the problem. You get used to it... It’s a trap.⁷⁸

Devora immigrated to Israel in 2004 and also has an academic degree in communications. At the time of the interview, she was 40, married with three children.

I get the impression that the call centers are a “breath of fresh air” for many immigrants. If they didn’t exist, many immigrants would go back to France. The call center is a source of income for an entire population.

⁷⁷ Susan Starr Sered, “Women, religion, and modernization. Tradition and transformation among elderly Jews in Israel,” *American Anthropologist* 92/2 (1990): 306-318.

⁷⁸ Interview of the research assistant with Ilana, Tel Aviv, August, 2012.

But it's sad that the work at these centers isolates us and causes us to remain isolated in a French environment.⁷⁹

Clara is in her late twenties. She arrived in Israel by herself at age 19. She lives in Tel Aviv and has had several short-term jobs. She also complains that the call center is a dead-end career move.

I wanted to avoid these kinds of jobs for new immigrants. For a while, I couldn't find a job, and I asked myself if I should go back to France. I saw a lot of people who gave up on their career. I did not want to sacrifice. I thought that I wouldn't stay in Israel at any cost. I finally found a job in marketing for an Israeli toy company, but my career isn't moving forward, and I am not improving my skills... I work for an online casino now. The work is in French. All the customers are French. It's legal, but just barely. The casino (online) is available from France only... I don't know if I'll ever have the opportunity to work in a Hebrew-speaking company. I've never interviewed for a job that required working only in Hebrew, perhaps because I undervalue my abilities. I have a friend who immigrated and started to work completely in Hebrew. She had no choice and even though it was hard, her Hebrew is perfect now. I lack confidence.⁸⁰

While these women spoke negatively of the call centers as demotivating, two of our women interviewees described them positively as an invaluable springboard to starting their own small businesses. Charlene relates:

Combined with my work here, I'm taking a course in how to set up a small business. I dream of opening my own small business. I know how to organize henna parties [North African-style engagement parties], and I really love it... That's what I want to do – organize henna parties. I brought supplies over from Morocco. I'll teach the women how to dance at these parties. It's coming back in style. I need lots of happiness in life, and it's happy! The target market will be mainly French speakers (immigrants), but if others are interested – with pleasure, I'm all for it.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Interview of the research assistant with Devora, Netanya, February, 2013.

⁸⁰ Interview of the research assistant with Clara, Tel Aviv, August, 2012.

⁸¹ Interview of the first and second A. with Charlene, Jerusalem, January, 2013.

Laura also spoke of the French-speaking call center as a valuable platform for learning the market and acquiring important business skills.

I started to work in Netanya at a call center. I discovered that I was a natural. I was a good worker. It was in renewable energies, and it was very easy. Then I worked in an advertising office, and I still have good relations with them. That company set up a French health magazine intended for French readership and sales in France... I learned everything I needed to know on the job, in the world of media and advertising. I realized that I could get ahead even more if I studied communications. Then I met a girl my age. We went out to lunch, and we decided to launch a magazine... We knew about the demands, the expectations. We talked with people over the phone, we saw what was going on the internet. What works very well is content focused on eroticism. There are many online sites selling lingerie and sex toys... We decided to launch a magazine for couples. We had our concept. We looked for French-speaking graphic designers, we looked for an office, and got started.⁸²

Charlene and Laura's experience at call centers heightened their business awareness, and thus, with hindsight, they viewed it as an opportunity. These women entrepreneurs exhibited rare drive and enthusiasm. For them, working at a call center served as a springboard for integrating as businesswomen in the global market (not necessarily Israeli). Many other women we interviewed combined work at a call center with studies at various types of entrepreneurship and business management programs.

Discussion

We have focused on the work experience of immigrant women working in the French-speaking call center industry that has recently developed in Israel. The explicit requirement that workers mask their national and religious identities has paradoxically led to the saliency of both national and religious identifications.⁸³ However, while previous studies spoke of the demoralizing effect of identity management or masking, we have shown how identity masking inspired women's sense of identity as they turned the call center into a safe enclave in

⁸² Interview of the research assistant with Ilana, Tel Aviv, April, 2012.

⁸³ Das et al., "The importance of being Indian."

which to draw distinctions between themselves and their callers, disengage from their previous lives as Frenchwomen, and refine and practice their Israeli identity. Many of the women found the center provided them with a supportive social network of women who shared their situation and could relate to their problems and challenges. Work at the call centers was convenient and flexible, thus permitting a manageable balance between work and family life. Furthermore, for some of the immigrants, this job enabled them to obtain knowledge of both the Israeli and French markets and to pursue studies in their free time. Some even dared to experiment with opening their own small businesses, knowing they had a safety net they could fall back on. On the other hand, working at a call center preserved their social position as foreigners – eternal immigrants. With this in mind, can we correctly define these call centers as honey traps (mainly for the younger, more educated women)?

To answer this question fully, we must consider the ways in which working at a call center provided the women with a sense of community. Most of the women we interviewed arrived in Israel either alone or with their spouses. Many started a nuclear family here in Israel, leaving behind their parents and siblings. In the absence of an extended family, the women working at call centers formed strong ties with their women colleagues and even bosses. This type of “simulated” family not only gave them the emotional support they sought, but also provided a supportive network of connections and a sense of belonging to a community – a community where they could practice their Judaism, share their problems and find employment. Through the workplace, the immigrants could rehearse their French and Jewish identity, and openly express their cultural uniqueness in Israel.

At present, the growth of a unique Francophone culture among French immigrants, as exemplified at French-speaking call centers, is apparent in broader contexts throughout Israeli society. In cities with large French populations, such as Netanya, Ashdod, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, we observe concrete evidence of this in the opening of new French restaurants, real estate agencies, and other businesses focusing on French clientele. The cultural particularity of the French immigrants is marked by distinct religious Jewish characteristics. For example, French immigrants open kosher restaurants offering French-style cuisine; they establish French-speaking synagogues and Torah study institutes.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Ben-Rafael, Ben-Rafael, *Sociologie et sociolinguistique des francophonies israéliennes*.

As we have seen, the French-speaking call centers intentionally encourage their employees to express their Jewish identity alongside the French, viewing the two types of identity as complementary rather than competing. This linguistic and cultural particularity, as Ben Rafael and Ben Rafael argue,⁸⁵ does not necessarily indicate the immigrants' desire to isolate themselves in a cultural bubble. On the contrary, the immigrants consider the freedom to exist in these two cultural worlds as a benefit that is possible only in Israel. The call center, with its strict boundary-setting processes, thus offers these immigrant women opportunities reflectively to construct their own sense of Israeli identity. It thus provides a valuable context in which nested and cross-cultural identities can be fostered.

While in the short term the transnational employment pattern presented in this study fulfills an economic, communal and social need for the immigrants, in the long run it may hinder their integration into the Hebrew-speaking job market. Policy makers should consider how better to integrate the highly educated, skilled professionals whose credentials are not recognized in Israel. Furthermore, these women could benefit from government-sponsored business courses in Hebrew as part of their immigration packages.

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⁸⁵ *Ibid.*