

Gender-Segregated Academic Programs for the Ultra-Orthodox: Between Access to Education and the Public Promotion of Segregation

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This article critically analyzes the development of gender-segregated academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox in Israel over the last two decades. In such programs, ultra-Orthodox men and women study on different campuses or at least in separate classes, and only male instructors teach in men's classes for the entire period of BA studies. The article argues that the current policy of the Council for Higher Education (CHE), which promotes the establishment of these programs, fails insofar as it is based on a limited understanding of the role of law and public policy and their impact on cultural norms and practices. This limited understanding is not unique to the Israeli context; it is inherent to the basic assumptions of the first wave of multiculturalism, on which the Israeli position on gender segregation is based. Through the lens of these assumptions, law and public policy are seen as a necessary tool for providing institutional protection to the predetermined religious and cultural needs of a minority group. Thus, in the Israeli context, gender segregation is perceived as being at the core of the ultra-Orthodox community's cultural identity, and the Council for Higher Education is therefore required to adapt the academic sphere to accommodate the fixed needs of this community.

In practice, however, a critical examination of the manner in which gender-segregated academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox have developed reveals a more nuanced picture, undermining the aforementioned assumptions. Specifically, two key findings emerge in this context. First, it turns out that the first gender-segregated academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox were established and began to operate with formal approval and public funding long before the CHE formulated a clear vision regarding the nature of these programs, their purpose, their target audience, and the permitted boundaries of gender segregation. In other words, strict segregation was first imposed in all academic programs for the ultra-Orthodox and then became the sole model for the integration of this religious minority in higher education, long before the CHE formulated a clear policy on these issues. Second, this sequencing had a dynamic effect on the modes of integration of the ultra-Orthodox public in higher education and on their attitudes toward gender-segregated academic programs. In other words, the gender-segregated academic frameworks, which began to operate under the auspices of the CHE almost two decades ago, not only met the existing needs of the ultra-Orthodox public, but also *shaped* these needs, strengthening the desire for gender segregation among members of this group and consequently affecting patterns of integration of the ultra-Orthodox public into institutions of higher education.

As in other public arenas in which gender segregation was given institutional authorization, it turns out that there is a thin line between a policy that responds to the cultural needs of the ultra-Orthodox public with regard to gender segregation and a policy that actively promotes such segregation. In fact, the longstanding relationship between the State of Israel and the ultra-Orthodox minority critically illuminates the role of law and public policy in shaping and affecting cultural attitudes and modes of behavior among members of the ultra-Orthodox community.