



# Women as a key to enhancing road safety in ultraorthodox communities in Israel <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The ultraorthodox sector in Israel, while an integral part of society, has unique cultural characteristics along with limited media exposure. Both these features impact the perceptions of driving and road safety, as well as the ability to influence them. In view of the scarcity of research literature on these issues, the present study sought to gain further insight into the community in an attempt to find a creative way to leverage road safety among ultraorthodox road users in Israel.

Using the phenomenological qualitative method, 60 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with women and men of different ages and backgrounds from the major ultraorthodox communities. Findings reveal that for the ultraorthodox, driving is a controversial subject that represents much more than its normative practical function in modern Western societies. It is subject to sociocultural restrictions that are reflected, *inter alia*, in limited public discourse on road safety. Moreover, the findings highlight the prominent educational role of women in this sector: they are exclusively responsible for raising young children, and are the sole educators of girls of all ages. In addition, as people tend to marry young, and men do not generally drive before marriage, women can influence the safety habits of their spouse as well as their children. The authors suggest building on this potential to increase awareness of road safety by empowering ultraorthodox women to serve as agents of social change in their family and community.

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## 1. Introduction

Studies on road safety typically examine drivers' personal and personality traits or family characteristics as contributors to the tendency for risky driving (e.g. Beck, Hartos, & Simons-Morton, 2002; Oltedal & Rundmo, 2006; Taubman – Ben-Ari & Yehiel, 2012). Only few have looked at the broader sociocultural context, that is, the role of social attitudes, norms, and values. These studies suggest that driving behaviors may also be associated with features such as religion and place of residence (Factor, Mahalel, & Yair, 2007; Rosenbloom, Nemrodov, & Barkan, 2004; Rosenbloom, Shahar, & Perlman, 2008).

Israel, although largely a modern Western society, is also home to several sub-populations with unique cultural characteristics, including the ultraorthodox (Haredi) sector. The ultraorthodox Jewish sector number about half a million people, or approximately 8% of the Israeli population (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

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The ultraorthodox community conducts a conservative religious lifestyle which is reflected in all aspects of life, including attitudes toward family and work, the place of the individual in society, the perception of community values, and the choice of place of residence (Caplan, 2003; Heilman & Friedman, 1991). Although ideologically divided into three major communities, Hasidic, Lithuanian (non-Hasidic Ashkenazi), and Sephardic, they all share a similar social structure and strict observance of Halacha, the laws set by accepted rabbinical authorities (Heilman & Friedman, 1991). The private space, the home, is associated with the woman, while the public space is the domain of the man (Eisenstadt, 1999). Women are excluded from most public places and rarely participate in public activities (Caplan, 2003; Hartman, 2008). However, they have extensive educational impact, being almost exclusively responsible for the rearing of young children and for the formal education of girls of all ages (El-Or, 2005; Heilman & Friedman, 1991).

Whereas driving has long been considered a routine proficiency in the Western world, this is not the case in ultraorthodox society, where it has never enjoyed social legitimacy and is therefore not regarded as a skill worth mastering or understanding (Guggenheim & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2014; Taubman – Ben-Ari & Shay, 2012). Though the ultraorthodox sector has a very convenient access to all modern aspects (including driving) in Israel, these are selectively used by its members due to stringent ideological principles. For the same reason, the ultraorthodox sector as a whole prefers public transportation over private cars, thus driving a car is less frequent within these communities in comparison to the general public. Most Israeli ultraorthodox communities greatly restrict driving for men, and throughout this population, women, regardless of age and marital statuses, as well as young single men, are forbidden from learning to drive except in extraordinary circumstances.

The small number of studies that have dealt specifically with road safety in ultraorthodox society (Guggenheim & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2014; Rosenbloom et al., 2004, 2008; Taubman – Ben-Ari & Shay, 2012) all warn that ultraorthodox road users, especially children, are at risk. However, none of them examined in depth the general discourse on road safety in the various communities or offered a key to enhancing their safety on the road.

Although there are no official statistics on ultraorthodox drivers, the Israeli National Road Safety Authority reported that between the years 2006–2010, 46% of the injured in road accidents among ultraorthodox towns were children aged 0–14 as compared to 23% in the general urban communities at the same age group (Israel National Road Safety Authority, 2011).

It is important to note that the ultraorthodox in Israel live in densely populated neighborhoods and insulate themselves from general society. They have their own media channels and an independent education system which are tightly sealed against external messages, including national road safety campaigns. There is a need, therefore, to find creative ways to effectively appeal to this population in order to moderate risky road behavior and encourage safe and responsible use of the roads.

A previous study investigated the attitudes of ultraorthodox women to road use and their cultural and emotional experiences of driving. The relatively small numbers of ultraorthodox women who currently drive, do it under the cloud of a prohibition. Their driving is regarded as a daring act and a sign of independence that constitutes a threat to the community in which they live. However, the study provided a glimpse into the potential role these women may play in promoting safety in their communities (Guggenheim & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2014).

The current study seeks to take this a step further, expanding the knowledge of the cultural aspects of road use in the ultraorthodox sector in Israel and suggesting ways in which women may be able to leverage road safety and responsible driving in this population.

### 1.1. *The current study*

The current study examined the discourse on aspects of driving and road safety in the ultraorthodox sector in Israel, with an emphasis on the influence women might have on safety issues in their communities. Due to the unique implications of the subject in ultraorthodox communities, it was decided to opt for a phenomenological qualitative methodology that would allow for more flexibility, as well as greater respect for and attentiveness to the cultural nuances in the population under study. Both men and women were interviewed in an effort to obtain as broad a picture as possible.

Two major perspectives were examined: (1) The cultural context of driving and road safety, e.g., What are the attitudes and perceptions regarding driving and road safety among the ultraorthodox? How do sociocultural restrictions influence the public discourse on road safety? and (2) Existing efforts to enhance road safety in the ultraorthodox sector and the potential of women to contribute to them. More specifically, what references are made to road safety in formal and educational frameworks? What is the role of ultraorthodox women in the discourse on road safety and how can they leverage the subject in their communities?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. *Participants*

The sample consisted of 60 ultraorthodox men and women; drivers and non-drivers. As demonstrated in Table 1, we included informants from different age groups, in order to achieve a broader, communal perspective of the unique cultural phenomenon with which the present study deals. In order to tap the attitudes of a variety of cultural backgrounds in this

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