

- **Name of the study:** Findings from a Preliminary Survey among Bridal Counselors and Balaniot for the Initiative "Developing Tailored Guidance for Women with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities, or Women with Cognitive Disabilities, Who Are Approaching Marriage"
- **Year:** 2024
- **Type of research:** Research Keren Shalem foundation
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- **Research Authority:** 'Michlol' - Research and Evaluation, Keren Shalem foundation.

Abstract

This research was conducted by the 'Michlol' Unit – Research and Evaluation, Shalem Foundation.

Background

The survey was conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Services, the Eden Association, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs, and Keren Shalem foundation as part of an initiative to develop a tailored training program for women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities who are preparing for marriage. These women face unique challenges during instruction and immersion due to difficulties in comprehension and functioning. Bride counselors and ritual bath attendants (balaniot) play a significant role in guiding these women, but most counselors and balaniot have not received tailored training for this topic. The primary objective of the survey is to describe the current situation among bride counselors and balaniot regarding the guidance of women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities and to serve as a basis for developing a tailored educational program to assist in guiding these women according to their unique needs.

Research Objective

The goal of the survey was to assess the current state and present an initial overview that would serve as a foundation for developing a tailored training program for women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities. The survey focused on the instructional challenges faced by bride counselors and balaniot and how they dealt with women who have cognitive difficulties.

Methodology

The survey questionnaire was developed by the 'Michlol' unit of the Keren Shalem foundation in collaboration with the project's steering committee and was distributed in June 2024 via the Google Forms platform. The questionnaire was sent to bride counselors and balaniot through WhatsApp

messages and emails using the distribution networks of the Ministry of Religious Services and the Eden Association.

The survey included 71 respondents – bride counselors and balaniot – from various locations in the country, providing services to women from diverse sectors. The questionnaire included several background questions (relating to their roles, the communities they serve, the frameworks in which they operate, etc.), as well as questions regarding the level of training they received for guiding this population, the challenges and difficulties they faced in general and in specific content areas, and their strategies for dealing with these situations. The findings were collected and analyzed by the 'Michlol' unit of the Shalem Foundation and presented in both quantitative and qualitative formats in the survey document.

Findings

The survey found that 76% of the instructors had not received any specific training for guiding women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, even though 84% of them felt that the women understood the guidance to a great extent despite the cognitive challenges. When asked to identify the areas in which they felt the women had significant difficulties in understanding (with the option to select from several reasons), the instructors reported three main areas: the number of tasks required, understanding concepts related to time (such as counting the days and preparing for immersion), and understanding the practical actions required, such as preparing for immersion and performing purity checks. In the Halachic realm, the instructors were presented with seven Halachic areas and were asked to indicate in which areas they felt the women had significant difficulties in understanding. They reported more considerable difficulties in understanding the laws of separation and distancing, the timing of checks, and purity checks.

When asked how they dealt with these challenges, the instructors employed several strategies, including repeating explanations, using visual aids such as drawings, diagrams, stories, and physical demonstrations, as well as providing emotional support tailored to the women's needs, using simple language, and checking for understanding throughout the guidance. In some cases, the instructors enlisted the help of companions, such as friends or family members of the women, to ensure the guidance was understood and applied correctly.

The instructors expressed a sense of mission and responsibility toward the women they guide but also concerns that the explanations might not be fully understood or that the women would struggle to apply the instructions, particularly given the complexity of the topics and the stress typical of the pre-wedding period. However, about a quarter of the respondents reported that they did not encounter any particular difficulties and felt confident in their ability to successfully deliver the instructions.

The instructors proposed several solutions for improving guidance, including the use of didactic tools such as physical demonstrations, visual registration of instructions, emphasizing the most important points, and providing continued telephone support for the women after the wedding. Additionally, they highlighted the need for specialized training in guiding women with intellectual or

cognitive disabilities, which should include the development of pedagogical tools to help them deliver guidance in a clear and understandable way for women with special needs.

Conclusions, Insights, and Recommendations

The survey findings were presented to the project partners on September 5, 2024. Following a discussion of the various findings, conclusions, insights, and recommendations were formulated for the next phase of developing tailored guidance for women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities.

Key points include:

1. Emphasis was placed on the need to profile the population and their needs for the instructors and balaniot participating in the tailored training course, with a focus on the differences between intellectual/cognitive disabilities and other disabilities, such as physical disabilities. A focus on the population's characteristics is planned to be included in one of the lessons of the course.
2. The findings presented in slides 6 and 7 (in the full report), which relate to specific instructional aspects that are more challenging to understand, as well as the specific Halachic content that the service recipients struggle to comprehend, may assist in making decisions regarding which content requires significant thought about whether it is essential or can be omitted, and if it must be retained – what are the best pedagogical tools to simplify and convey the subject clearly to the women. Of course, the decision regarding core topics and content that can or cannot be removed from the instruction will be based on the recommendations of the rabbis involved in developing the tailored guidance.
3. The findings presented in slide 8 (in the full report) highlight the sensitivity of the instructors and balaniot toward the women with disabilities (the conversation should be directed to the woman herself, or at most equally to the woman and her companion, but not just to the companion). Furthermore, throughout all the findings, the instructors' commitment, care, sense of mission, and the great importance they place on ensuring that the women understand and apply what they are taught is prominently evident.
4. The importance of involving rabbis who are familiar with women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities was emphasized so that decisions can be made together with them regarding the essential Halachic content versus content that can be omitted or reduced. A suggestion was raised to approach rabbis working with welfare frameworks.

The survey findings may be useful to the steering committee in several ways:

- Developing Halachic content: Presenting the limitations, abilities, and challenges of the service recipients to the rabbis will assist in deliberating the Halachic content to be included in the tailored guidance.
- Developing course content: The content to be developed can be based, among other things, on the findings from the survey, both in terms of the content found to be complex and challenging to understand and in terms of the instructors' feelings when guiding a population of women with intellectual or cognitive disabilities.

- Developing instructional tools: The findings can assist in determining which content areas warrant investment in developing pedagogical tools and creating auxiliary materials to simplify, make accessible, demonstrate, and illustrate the content and actions that the women are expected to understand and perform.

Keywords

Bride Counselors, Ritual Bath Attendants, Intellectual Disability, Cognitive Disability, Marriage Guidance, Tailored Instruction, Professional Training, Halachic Content.

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