

Respectable Femininity and Career Agency: Exploring Paradoxical Imperatives

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This paper places respectable femininity at the very centre of career enactment. In the accounts of 24 Sri Lankan women, notions of being a 'respectable' woman recurred as respondents described how important it was to adhere to the powerful behavioural norms for women in their organizations and society. However while such respectability was vital for women's career progression, it ultimately restricted their agency and conflicted with other requirements for advancement. Based on our empirical findings, we propose that being a respectable woman was experienced as paradox, where at times it was seen as impossible to be both a good woman and a successful careerist. We highlight the implications of our findings for women's careers in South Asia and more widely.

Keywords: respectable femininity, gender, career, gendered organization, paradox

Introduction

In the turbulent environment surrounding contemporary organizations and the changing nature of work, individuals need to take responsibility for managing their own careers. Z. King (2004) describes career self-management as a dynamic process involving a set of co-occurring behaviours: positioning behaviours focusing on accumulating the contacts, skills and experience necessary to achieve one's desired career outcomes; influence behaviours attempting to sway the decisions of key gatekeepers to those outcomes; and boundary management concerned with balancing the demands of work and personal life. This analysis raises important questions for women, given widespread evidence that women are excluded from key organizational networks (Cabrera, 2007), are less likely than men to use impression management techniques (Oakley, 2000) and still bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities (Crompton *et al.*, 2005). In this paper we use respectable femininity as a lens for exploring women's potential to accumulate social capital and their propensity to use influence behaviours to pursue their career aspirations.

Respectable femininity is an ideological construct leading to a set of behavioural norms commonly linked to the 19th and early 20th centuries (Radhakrishnan, 2009). In the Victorian era, British women achieved respectability by adhering to prevailing moral rules and gendered expectations relating to behaviour and appearance (Skeggs, 1997). Respectable women dressed modestly (Whitehead, 2005), demonstrated self-restraint (Whiteside, 2007), were sober and well-mannered, and confined themselves to mainly private spheres (Thorpe, 1996). Domesticity was also a central component of respectability, where good women were dutiful mothers and effective housekeepers (Skeggs, 1997). In the current Western management literature, there is very little reference to 'respectability'. Although this seems to suggest that moral concerns for women are non-existent today and contested issues have been resolved, we would argue that old concepts and imperatives do not disappear out of people's lives but rather are played out in new ways. Indeed, the extensive literature on women's 'otherness'

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in organizations alludes to notions of 'appropriateness', although rarely describing it in moral terms (see Watts, 2010). It is extremely important to understand how respectability plays out in women's careers because factors like domesticity and self-restraint which confines women to private spheres are inconsistent with networking and impression management, seen as vital to developing a career in contemporary organizations. Indeed, scholars have noted that women are less successful in networking (see Ibarra, 1993) and less likely to engage in impression management techniques in comparison to their male counterparts (see Lee *et al.*, 1999) and one would wonder whether there is another explanation for this, apart from male exclusion.

Although moral concerns in women's experiences of work are largely absent in the current western literature, they are highlighted in contemporary South Asian research. In a study of professional women in India's new IT industry, Radhakrishnan (2009) argues that respectable behaviours are rewarded, while those that are not respectable are sanctioned. However, she suggests that in complying with these behavioural norms, women are forced to make career compromises (although without specifying exactly what these are) (Radhakrishnan, 2008). In this paper we consider how respectable femininity plays out in the career accounts of Sri Lankan women. We examine what women see as prevailing behavioural expectations and their impact on women's ability to network with influential others and to engage in influencing behaviours, two processes which are vital for their career progression (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010). Given that increasing numbers of women around the world pursue higher education and aspire to high-level careers (Crompton, 2006), understanding these implicit, almost transparent, but powerful barriers is extremely important. By examining the relationship between respectable femininity and career in a context where respectability is vividly expressed, we provide an important starting point for exploring the more subtle ways in which it could be played out elsewhere.

Women and career self-management

Career self-management is based on the premise that one's ability to achieve one's desired career outcomes (e.g., hierarchical progression, salary or skill development) depends on gatekeepers: individuals who hold key positions within organizational or wider social structures (e.g., managers, mentors, clients) (Z. King, 2001, 2004). Given that gatekeepers' decisions are circumscribed by their own personal agendas and wider political exigencies, people seeking career advancement draw on a repertoire of behaviours to ensure that gatekeepers act in their interests. King classifies these behaviours into three groupings: positioning, influence and boundary management. We are interested in positioning because research has found that notwithstanding their importance for career progression (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Tymon and Stumpf, 2003), women have difficulties accessing key social networks. As for influence, scholars argue that women are less likely than men to exploit their networks, even though they are vital in compensating for their lack of social capital (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010). In the following paragraphs we will briefly consider the literature on women and social capital, and women's use of influencing behaviours.

Social capital

There is a consensus among scholars that social capital is vital for women's career advancement (Singh *et al.*, 2006), highlighting how networking can be used strategically to break through the glass ceiling (Wellington, 2001). However, research has found that in work settings women are frequently excluded from key social groups (Cabrera, 2007; Ibarra, 1993). Women's token status within organizations (Whitlock, 2002) can be expected to result in their networks being smaller and less influential than men's. In a study by Ibarra (1993), female managers were less likely than their male colleagues to have access to the types of social networks that helped them identify external job opportunities. Ibarra suggests that women lack 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973), which are seen as an important source of external job information, and ultimately opportunities (Z. King, 2004).

McGuire (2000) argues that women tend to network with lower status colleagues, because they lack access to powerful individuals due to the organizational positions they typically occupy (see also Rothstein *et al.*, 2001). Here, McGuire refers to both the structures of women's networks (Granovetter, 1973) and the resources embedded within them (Lin *et al.*, 1981). Scholars suggest that women seeking access need to engage in influence behaviours to ensure their visibility and ultimately to secure strong organizational sponsorship (Broadbridge, 2007; Jackson, 2001). We will discuss this in the next section.

Influence behaviours

Influence behaviours aim to 'influence the decisions of key gatekeepers to desired career outcomes' (Z. King, 2004, p. 121). King distinguishes between three types: self-promotion, ingratiation and upward influence. Self-promotion is presenting oneself in a favourable light so that gatekeepers associate those positive attributes with that person. Ingratiation involves doing favours for or giving compliments to significant others (Appelbaum and Hughes, 1998) in order to appear attractive — a quality which Z. King (2004) argues improves promotion chances. Upward influence is when a person discloses their career goals to gatekeepers, thereby increasing their sense of obligation and their inclination to offer support.

Scholars agree that women are likely to progress faster if they secure the support of an influential organizational sponsor (Burt, 1998). However, developing these vital social relationships can be problematic for women since rapport-building typically happens through male pursuits such as drinking and/or playing or discussing sport (Dryburgh, 1999). Furthermore, to engage in such activities one needs to be available (Gambles *et al.*, 2006; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010). This is a problem for women who are expected to fulfil significant domestic roles (Crompton *et al.*, 2005) or are perceived as having such responsibilities (Lyng, 2010).

Respectable femininity

Respectable femininity is a gendered construct traceable to the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is manifest in the form of behavioural expectations in workplaces, streets and/or homes. Women's respectability in colonial times was related to domesticity, appropriate language and behaviour (Skeggs, 1997) and sexual restraint (Frances, 1994). Respectable women in the early 20th century occupied mainly private spaces (Skeggs, 1997) and were rarely seen in public houses (Thorpe, 1996). If spotted in such places, they were cast as 'public women' and subjected to harsh social sanction (Wright, 2003).

Whitehead (2005) elucidates the role respectability played in early 20th-century women's employment, describing how teaching applicants in the 1920s were required to provide satisfactory evidence of respectability alongside other occupational aptitudes. Ideal teaching recruits were not just women with a particular knowledge or skill base, but rather those who embodied a certain, prescribed form of morality. Whitehead reveals how city teachers in 1923 advised young women to dress neatly and suitably 'to maintain self-respect and avoid sinking in the estimation of the public' (2005, p. 585). Scholars have argued that these intransigent moral rules restricted women from adopting identities that matched the changing times (Wolf, 1993). Although more recent studies of women's careers in the West have not considered moral issues explicitly, concerns about respectability have been raised as a crucial issue in studies of women workers in South Asia.

In India, reports in the academic and popular press have highlighted the perceived moral dangers for women working late and travelling between home and work at night. Scholars suggest that the presence of lone women in the nightscape represents a break in traditional norms (Patel, 2006), where women are supposed to be confined to private domestic spaces (Patel and Parmentier, 2005). As a result, Phadke (2007) found that women workers moving around at night are often stopped by suspicious policemen and watched by curious neighbours. Mindful of this moral panic, she explains

that women are compelled to negotiate with these concerned parties simply to carry on with their jobs (although she does not give details on how this negotiation is practically conducted). In the popular media, Indian cities are often described as dangerous places for women. However, Phadke (2007) argues that within this discourse of risk and safety the concern is not that women will be killed or robbed, but rather that they will be sexually assaulted or engage in consensual sexual relations. In her view the prospect of women having sexual relations before marriage is seen to threaten the moral fabric of modern India. Thus for Indian women, men represent a perpetual risk, with consequences not only for the women themselves, but also for wider society. This is clearly a significant issue for women's participation in public life, and is a particular career concern since career building inevitably involves extensive interaction with men from various walks of life.

Considering the new call centre industry, Indian citizens have raised concerns over the 'informal, American-style college campus atmosphere' in these workplaces, encouraging promiscuity and casual sexual liaisons amongst young employees (Dhillon, 2003). The rising number of abortions in the city of Bangalore has been blamed on these ostensibly Westernized cultures, and many parents are reluctant to allow their daughters to take up employment in this industry because of this reputation (Dhillon, 2003). However, middle-class women in India are increasingly joining the professional workforce in multinational organizations. This raises the question of how women in these contexts manage prevailing behavioural norms in pursuing their career goals (Lynch, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2009).

In a study of professional women in the software industry, Radhakrishnan (2009) provides insights into how women present themselves as the 'culturally appropriate' yet 'modern', exercising just the 'right' amount of freedom, conforming to 'appropriate' sexual behaviours and striking a balance between work and family. Radhakrishnan calls this 'respectable femininity'. She shows how modern women distinguish themselves from promiscuous Western women and from Indian women of previous generations 'through a discourse of balance, restraint, and knowing the limit' and 'enact idealised femininities that conform to these norms in the workplace, providing a snapshot of cultural difference for the entire world to see' (2009, p. 211). Radhakrishnan argues that while this mode of femininity is rewarded, 'alternative femininities' are sanctioned. Notably, though, she does not explain these 'alternative femininities' or how the sanctions operate, nor does she consider the possible career implications of women's 'respectable behaviour'. In a previous study she suggests that adherence to this strict code can lead to career compromises, but does not elaborate on this point (Radhakrishnan, 2008).

At the level of the organization, a few studies detail the measures Indian employers take to protect their female staff from perceived moral dangers, such as arranging private transportation and male escorts (Phadke, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2009). For example, Patel (2006) describes how call centre managers personally visit prospective women employees' families to convince them that the working conditions and transportation are safe. However, there is some evidence that companies are reluctant to hire women because they do not want to take on such obligations (Budhwar *et al.*, 2005; Nath, 2000).

What this research seems to suggest is that norms of moral conduct for women have the potential to impact on careers. Indeed, in our respondents' accounts, 'career' was all tangled up with notions of being a respectable woman. This motivated us to look beyond respondents' descriptions of how they managed norms of good behaviour, and to understand the potential for these norms to impact on women's career agency: in particular, their ability to accumulate social capital in career and engage in influence behaviours. The empirical section of the paper focuses on these questions:

1. How do highly skilled women in Sri Lanka account for 'respectability' in the context of career?
2. How does being a respectable woman impact on women's career agency: in particular, their ability to network and engage in influence behaviours?

Research design

Our study is based on interviews conducted by the first author with 24 women; eight in their early careers (ages 24–36), eight in mid-career (ages 36–45), and eight in late career (ages 46–60) (O'Neil and

Bilimoria, 2005). The sample was designed in this way because scholars argue that women's preoccupations differ according to their career stage (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). Twelve respondents were working for private sector organizations, while twelve were in the public sector. We included equal numbers from each because of their contrasting cultures and structures. Private organizations in Sri Lanka are seen to pay high salaries and have Western-influenced cultures: superiors are addressed by first names, work-life policies are widely available and career paths are based on merit. Public organizations in contrast are known to be poor paymasters with traditional bureaucratic organizational cultures and career paths based on time served. Our respondents worked in a variety of industries including medicine, finance, banking, sales and marketing, education and engineering (see Table 1).

All respondents were qualified to graduate level or above. Twenty were married and had children. The four unmarried women were in their early careers. Respondents were identified through a snowball sampling method (Salganik and Heckathorn, 2004). Twenty-one women belonged to the majority ethnic-religious group in Sri Lanka: Sinhalese Buddhists. Two women were Christians and one was a Hindu. All of the women were from the capital city, Colombo, and experienced considerable social privilege, living in desirable neighbourhoods, employing domestic aides and educating their children in prestigious schools.

In in-depth interviews with the first author, women unfolded their career stories. Notably, at the time of interviews, we did not set out to examine how respectability plays out in women's careers. Rather our intention was to examine how women enacted their careers in the light of their home and work contexts. We were particularly interested in hearing women's accounts of gendering in Sri Lankan organizations, an issue widely noted in extant literature (Lewis and Simpson, 2010). However, upon examining our data, we discovered that moral concerns were a major preoccupation in respondents' accounts. For example, exploring how gender-based exclusion played out in Sri Lanka, we asked women about their experiences of networking with men. Several respondents described how they networked cautiously since they did not want to be misinterpreted as unrespectable. Similarly, when asked about male/female workplace interaction (again seeking to better understand exclusionary practices), the younger respondents emphasized how important it was to maintain an appropriate distance with male colleagues, even when the situation might seem to call for a level of physical proximity (such as in a counselling context). When probed further, they explained that they did not want to be seen as 'coming on' to men, vividly describing the fate of women who breached prevailing norms of behaviour in organizations — shunned by colleagues and looked down upon by superiors. Thus respectable femininity was a key theme in our data and we decided to examine how exactly this plays out in women's career progression, since at the outset these behaviours appeared rather restrictive and as significantly constraining career agency.

The interviews were not digitally recorded because most respondents were uncomfortable about having their voices on computer files. In the main the women understood research as questionnaire surveys (which they saw as completely anonymous) and they did not like the idea of interviews being recorded. Since the first author wanted to make respondents feel at ease and encourage them to share their experiences freely, she decided to take notes of women's narratives using shorthand. This was indeed a very challenging process which was achieved in practice by pausing after each question to record the answer verbatim. This extended the length of an interview to over three hours in most cases. However, the interviewees were extremely cooperative. The development of full transcripts began as soon as each interview came to an end. In every case the full script was presented to the respondent to make sure that everything she said had been captured correctly.

Key themes were identified during the data collection itself, as data collection and analysis were undertaken in parallel (Silverman, 2009). Template analysis (N. King, 2004) was the main technique used. We first developed a list of codes (template) representing the key themes. These were identified in relation to the main questions in the interview topic guide (N. King, 2004), which in turn had been informed by the literature reviewed and the first researcher's personal experience of the Sri Lankan context. We also developed codes on the basis of themes frequently raised by respondents. Once the initial template was constructed, we worked systematically through the transcripts assigning sections

Table 1: Career profiles of respondents

Name	Age	Sector/Industry	Profession/Designation	Education
Natasha	25	Public: Media	Journalist	BA (Sheffield)
Niranjala	24	Public: Banking	Personal Banker	IBSL (Sri Lanka)
Gayathri	29	Public: Medical	Doctor (House officer)	MBBS (Russia)
Sashi	32	Public: Education	University Lecturer	BA (Sri Lanka), MSc (Sri Lanka)
Sherangi	26	Private: Mobile Telecommunications	Assistant Brand Manager	HND (UK), CIM (UK)
Shamila	32	Private: Mobile Telecommunications	Psychologist	BSc MSc (Waikato)
Roshini	28	Private: Manufacturing	Engineer	BEng (McGill)
Kishani	31	Private: Finance	Legal Officer	BA (Sri Lanka) LLB (Sri Lanka)
Charka	36	Public: Medical	Doctor (Registrar)	MBBS (Sri Lanka), MRCP (Sri Lanka) in progress
Irangi	37	Public: Education	University Senior Lecturer	BA (Sri Lanka), PhD (Monash)
Vandana	38	Public: Banking	Bank Manager	IBSL (Sri Lanka), SLIM (Sri Lanka)
Radika	36	Public: Transport	Senior Engineer	BEng (Kingston), MEng (Imperial College)
Shanili	36	Private: Finance	Vice President (Sales and Marketing)	BSc (Portsmouth), MBA (Wales)
Diluni	39	Private: Manufacturing	Training & Development Consultant	BSc (Sri Lanka), MBA (Manchester)
Kalpana	37	Private: Hospitality	Food & Beverage Manager	BA (Sri Lanka), HCIMA (UK)
Nishanya	36	Private: Garment Manufacturing	Finance Manager	ACMA (UK), MBA (Wales) in progress
Swaneetha	61	Public: Education	Senior Professor	BSc (Sri Lanka), PhD (Lancaster)
Rupika	54	Public: Banking	Director Bank Operations	BA (Sri Lanka), MSc (LSE)
Kanthi	52	Public: Government Services	Permanent Secretary for a Cabinet ministry	BA (Sri Lanka), SLAS (Sri Lanka)
Dilhari	48	Public: Finance	Assistant Director Statistics	BSc (Sri Lanka), MSc (Warwick)
Michelle	51	Private: Service-based conglomerate	Director HRM	PgDip (Mngt), Sri Lanka, MA (HRM) in progress
Madhavi	48	Private: Service-based conglomerate	Head of Strategic Planning	LLB (UCL), FCMA (UK), MBA (Sri Lanka)
Devika	46	Private: Finance	Director Special Projects	FCMA (UK)
Anouka	49	Private: Medical	General practitioner/ Head of counselling	MBBS (Sri Lanka)

of data texts to one or more appropriate codes. The NVivo 8 software package was used to facilitate data coding and to establish frequencies. The template was continuously modified in the process of coding. Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997) notion of 'progressive focusing' describes the process we followed, where categories were defined rather loosely in the beginning but became more specific as the analysis progressed. In other words, we split the dominant themes into several subsidiary categories and amalgamated some subsidiary categories as we continued our analysis. We also carefully examined all data texts which were not associated with a theme and purposefully looked out for contrasting and minority views in our data to ensure that our analysis was based on all respondents' voices rather than just the dominant majority.

We read and re-read the contents of each theme and discussed the contents together to develop our understanding of the individual themes as well as the relationships and associations between them. We also wrote individual case studies of each respondent and discussed the similarities and differences between the cases. This helped us gain a good understanding of the perspectives of all our respondents and ensured that our discussions were not drifting towards generalizations (N. King, 2004). We developed written accounts of our discussions drawing on illustrative quotes from each transcript as required (N. King, 2004). This continued to develop our understanding of the overriding patterns and relationships between the data themes and most importantly the 'big picture'.

The Sri Lankan context

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country, with a population of about 20 million people. Minority religious groups include Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Scholars have described Sri Lanka as a patriarchal society (Lynch, 1999), characterized by extended family relations (Niles, 1998), intergenerational caring obligations (Perera, 1991) and significant social divisions. However, despite these deeply patriarchal features, the socio-cultural position of Sri Lankan women is seen as favourable when compared to women of other South Asian countries (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997).

There is widespread acceptance of education and employment for women (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997), where 90 per cent of Sri Lankan women were identified as literate in the 2009 Labour Force Survey, and women comprise 63.2 per cent of the country's total number of professionals (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). However, the prevailing gender ideology could be broadly described as one 'which perceives men as providers of income and security, while women are perceived as nurturers and care givers' (Wijayatilake, 2001, p. 73). Closely associated with nurturing, women in Sri Lanka are burdened with being the 'cultural archive of the society from which its conventions and traditions would be transmitted to the next generation' (Perera, 1997, p. 5). Thus Perera (1997) argues that visible cultural change among women may be disapproved of, as women are seen as essential for Sri Lanka's long-term socio-cultural survival.

In sum, the literature reviewed so far suggests that moral concerns for women have the potential to significantly constrain their careers. However, to date, scholars have paid only little attention to how respectability plays out in women's career development. In this paper we address this increasingly important area through our study of highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka: a context where respectability is vividly expressed. In what follows, we present our findings on how norms and perceptions of respectability influence women's career progression.

Findings

All of our respondents aspired to reach the highest levels in their organizational hierarchies and specified the rules for promotion for women, which included conforming to society's ideals of respectable femininity. The problem was that this requirement was inconsistent with the other conditions for advancement and therefore women were compelled to continuously negotiate between often conflicting behavioural expectations. In what follows we start by identifying what women saw as the requirements for career advancement, and then discuss how these intersected with norms of respectable femininity.

Conditions for advancement

The majority of respondents argued that performing one's official roles better than others, doing more than the minimum required (Lyng, 2010) and making one's excellent performance visible to important others were essential to progress upwards. Rupika explains how she climbed up the hierarchy of a large public bank:

The first time I took part in DOC's launching of new branches — I discovered that I was quite a good trainer. So the next time they branched, I requested the head of operations to be involved in this branching operation. It was a lot of work but I took it as an opportunity to get noticed by the board. On top of launching new branches and training personnel, I was also involved in briefing branch managers about the wider functions of banking like credit and treasury. During this period they recognized my talents and dedication. So after this operation I was made the Assistant General Manager of branch operations at DOC. (Rupika, 54)

Seventeen women emphasized that 'weak ties' or ties that reach outside one's social clique (Granovetter, 1973) are vital to secure senior jobs in Sri Lanka, as most are advertised through word of mouth and awarded on a first-come-first-served basis. Kalpana explains:

Networking is very important in hospitality. You get to know about most job appointments through word of mouth ... One of my husband's colleagues is the Marketing Director at Binnamon, she was telling me about a job their F&B manager had got in Fiji. This was a casual conversation we had, but I immediately told her that I would be interested in his job if he was leaving. I handed my CV to her the next morning — I wanted to get to the job before it was advertised. And I was successful — the board was pleased with my application and they decided not to advertise the post. (Kalpana, 37)

Furthermore, individuals were hired on the basis of their ties to influential others. Sherangi who works in public relations explains:

At my interview they asked me whether I knew some key journalists. As soon as I told them that I knew them at an informal level they were keen on me. (Sherangi, 26)

Early and mid-career respondents argued that being seen in the organization outside official working hours (Gambles *et al.*, 2006) and participating in wider activities, entertaining organizational clients and attending social events were essential to progress (Lyng, 2010). Sashi, a lecturer, explains the presenteeism expectations in a leading public university:

Being seen is very important to the people in the department — the more you are seen the happier they are. (Sashi, 32)

Presenteeism was especially important in private sector contexts. Shamila explains how the leading mobile telecommunication company she worked for expected young women to entertain organizational clients after hours (Watts, 2010):

Whenever someone from abroad comes, HR is required to entertain them out of hours. I always get caught for this. When I asked my manager why me — he said that it is because I can talk to people very easily! (Shamila, 32)

Shanili talks about the requirement to participate in after-hours social events in a large financial outsourcing firm:

They hold too many events for employees — too much that it is not pleasurable. Within this year they celebrated Valentine's day, Halloween, the Sinhalese new year — all those were big do's — we'll probably have another array of events for Christmas and New Year. And we have the regular Friday night drink that everybody meets up for, and there are these cricket matches that the Namba team plays against other offices. The management encourages everybody to attend these matches to build citizenship, but they play a match almost every weekend! (Shanili, 36)

Although the male-oriented nature of cricket matches and after-hours drinking excluded women (Dryburgh, 1999), they were still required to participate in these events. Notably, almost all early and mid-career women from the private sector agreed that career progression is, in part, contingent on participation in after-hours socializing.

Respondents, particularly early and mid-career, highlighted the importance of pleasing superiors in order to secure their goodwill and sponsorship for climbing their organizations' hierarchies (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010):

The editors are like god; one thing I learned is that you don't contradict whatever they say. You just take their word for it and revise your work accordingly. And you don't refuse anything that is handed over to you however busy you are. You just take it up. You have to keep all the big people happy if you want better assignments, your own column, etc. Everything is after all at the discretion of the editor. (Natasha, 25)

A number of women saw ingratiation with superiors (doing favours and giving compliments) (Appelbaum and Hughes, 1998) as an essential career-building technique:

Your progression is guaranteed if you stick up to the key people; that's the Sri Lankan work model for you! (Shamila, 32)

The interplay between conditions for advancement and respectable femininity

Amongst our respondents there was strong agreement that the 'rules' described above were essential to career progression. However, cutting across these rules was another moral imperative which women were expected to adhere to if they wished to advance their careers: respectable femininity. Indeed, the majority of our respondents, particularly in early and mid-career, spontaneously explained how conforming to society's ideals of respectability was critical to their hierarchical advancement. Only women who were seen as enacting this ideal won their colleagues' and superiors' respect, thereby securing the goodwill that made progression possible. However, respondents' accounts of the rules of respectability for women conflicted with the other progression requirements. In what follows, we consider how women struggled to manage themselves between these conflicting behavioural expectations.

Limited interactions with casual male acquaintances

Six women talked about how extensive interactions with casual male acquaintances were considered inappropriate for respectable women in Sri Lanka (Phadke, 2007). Five early and mid-career respondents specifically voiced their concerns about breaching this norm:

Most people in Economics are men. So I am nervous of trying to exchange business cards with them. You can't be sure of what they would think. (Sashi, 32)

Sashi seemed to be uncomfortable to network with men in her field since she was unsure about how her actions would be interpreted. Many other women in this sample shared her concerns. Their response to this difficult situation was careful and judicious networking:

When I meet people from big companies or from the finance field I try to exchange business cards. It may come useful at one point or the other. But I do this cautiously. I am careful about who I give my business card to. You can't go about giving your contact details to men just like that. (Nishanya, 36)

Although women recognized the importance of 'weak ties' in developing a career in Sri Lanka, they were conservative in exchanging business cards with men since they did not want to risk their good reputation. Indeed, the lack of social capital was a significant obstacle to women's career progress.

Thus extensive networking, seen as essential to develop a career in Sri Lanka, conflicted with respectable behaviour, also seen as critical to advance upwards, leaving women workers in an irresolvable paradox.

Not being seen alone with a man out of office hours and/or official premises

Three women spoke about how being seen alone with a man out of office hours and/or official premises was not expected from a good woman in Sri Lanka. Because of this, they restricted their availability to only office hours. Diluni explains:

Some of the younger guys ask whether I want to meet up to talk about this in detail, and I am in two minds. In our country you can easily be perceived in a wrong way in trying to make contacts with men. So I am very careful. I tell them straight out that I am available for meetings during office hours only and my out of office hours are reserved for my children. In England I joined my colleagues for a Friday night drink, it was anti-social not to. But in Sri Lanka, it's different; women of my age don't do that sort of thing. (Diluni, 39)

Diluni not only explains how she works around norms of respectable behaviour by meeting male clients only during office hours, but also draws an interesting distinction between behavioural norms for women in the UK and in Sri Lanka. Diluni used the 'ideal mother' discourse (Burr, 1995) to craft her 'respectable' identity by explaining that her out of office hours are reserved for her children. Although restricting availability in this way may help Diluni conform to codes of moral conduct for women in Sri Lankan society, she was missing out on opportunities to develop relationships with significant others — a crucial prerequisite to career advancement.

Shamila, a psychologist, talked about how her in-laws advised her not to be seen alone with male clients out of office hours and away from official premises since it might lead to misinterpretation:

I remember my in-laws saying that I shouldn't be seen alone with male clients drinking coffee since nobody knows that they are my clients and people may think I am having an affair. They always used to tell me to try to be in a crowd of at least three people. I cannot exactly drag another third person when I counsel a particular client. (Shamila, 32)

Shamila sees confidential services, unlimited time availability and emotional connectivity as fundamental to the role of a counselling psychologist. However, she felt constrained from offering these, because respectable women must not be seen alone, out of office hours with casual male acquaintances. She was thus left in a paradoxical situation: obliged to conform to norms of respectability, but in doing so unable to demonstrate the excellent performance necessary for advancement within her organization.

Maintaining appropriate physical and emotional distance from men

Three respondents talked about how organizations and society expected 'respectable' women to maintain a physical and emotional distance from men. However, two women were compelled to breach this norm due to the nature of their work. Diluni, who works as a corporate trainer and management coach, explains:

Especially in these NLP trainings I have to build rapport with my participants, ask them questions and discuss intimate matters. So actually I am coming close to these guys, perhaps closer than what is considered appropriate. So they obviously react. They look at each other, wink, try to get into conversations with me after sessions, ring me up at office unnecessarily. I am not exaggerating but it is very difficult to deliver trainings in Sri Lanka. (Diluni, 39)

This excerpt highlights the consequences of this moral transgression, where some of Diluni's male clients saw her behaviour as sexually suggestive. She tried to sound as 'formal' and 'professional' as

possible when delivering training to male clients in order to conform to social expectations. This, however, meant compromising on her effectiveness as a management coach.

Shamila, a counsellor, similarly talked about the challenges she faced in conforming to unwritten rules about keeping a physical distance from men:

In the context of counselling I try to be at ease with my clients, sometimes giving them a hug or patting them on their back, I don't think about the gender of the client in making these gestures — they come naturally. However, the word had gotten around to my husband and his family that I was very 'hands on' with my clients. Somebody had told my husband that I touch men as I counsel them. So I suppose laying a hand on a man's shoulder is considered wrong — even if it was meant to comfort a person in distress. I found this significantly challenging. I couldn't connect with the client without thinking twice about how it would be interpreted. (Shamila, 32)

It is important to note that amongst our respondents, Shamila was exceptional. Born and raised in New Zealand, she was well aware of the paradox posed by conflicting rules and in her way, resisted the prevailing moral codes in line with her professional standards. However, she recognized that this transgression may have repercussions and indeed, rumours about her 'questionable' respectability abounded and eventually made her employment in that organization untenable.

Not being seen alone at night

Many respondents spoke about how society did not expect women to be seen alone at night (Phadke, 2007). Early and mid-career women from private sector organizations seemed to be particularly affected because, as highlighted earlier, night-time events are a feature of modern, 'Western-style' Sri Lankan organizations. Roshini, who works for a leading apparel manufacturing firm, talked about how social gatherings in the nightscape are inconsistent with rules of moral conduct for women in Sri Lankan society:

It is not too nice for me to be seen without my husband in late nights. I don't know how to explain it but one day I met one of his [her husband's] friends at one of the NAS [her organization] club nights and for some reason I was rather embarrassed to be out alone without my husband. I was wondering about what he and his wife thought about me all night. When you are married it is different to being single isn't it? (Roshini, 28)

Being seen alone at night was especially unacceptable for married women. However, after-hours workplace socializing was essential for career progression in the private sector. In response to this untenable conflict, Roshini targeted organizational events that she could attend with her husband, subtly avoiding others:

I try to go with him [her husband] as much as possible, but certain events are for employees only. I try to avoid events which he cannot attend. (Roshini, 28)

Other respondents negotiated in a similar manner by attending social gatherings at work selectively, calling in sick occasionally or using their young children as excuses to stay home.

Organizational enforcement of respectable femininity

Interestingly managers and bosses appeared to turn a blind eye to women's manoeuvring and in many instances seemed to actively encourage it, albeit implicitly. For example, many women spoke about how their bosses allowed them to leave after-hours work meetings earlier than men just because they were women. Kishani explains:

Monday the meetings go on till about 8.30 pm. But I get to come around 7.45. That's one of the advantages of being a woman. Usually women get to come away early since they have children at home. (Kishani, 31)

Roshini talked about the great efforts her organization went to in providing security for the women who participated in an overnight training programme:

The company provided a lot of security for the women who participated. Senior women from HR were assigned to go with groups which had women and I heard that the women were required to sleep in a rest house near the camp site and join others for the activities during the day. They were not allowed to sleep in tents. They [the company] just had to do it I guess. If something had happened to a woman people would just blame it on the company. (Roshini, 29)

All these data indicate that organizations positively endorse ideals of respectable femininity (Radhakrishnan, 2009), and fully expect women to conform to these social rules. Significantly, a number of respondents explained the career consequences in store for women who transgressed:

Women who are overly chatty with men, who do not maintain the appropriate distance, are spoken about at lunch tables, called names like 'fast' behind their backs, obviously this sort of women won't be selected for leaders. A leader is someone that others respect — if you don't earn respect, you are obviously not going to be selected to lead others. It is going to be ineffective — nobody will follow your direction. (Roshini, 28)

In this insightful excerpt, Roshini highlights how behaving according to the norms of respectable femininity is absolutely vital for women's career advancement. However, respondents explained that at the same time their superiors routinely asked them to breach these codes: expecting them to attend work events out of hours as a way of promoting organizational citizenship and to entertain clients out of hours in order to develop important relationships. In this sense, organizations seemed to be making conflicting demands of women. It was significant, though, that instead of discussing this issue directly in their interviews, respondents showed how they worked around it. Permeating their accounts were stories of how they continually manoeuvred between codes of moral conduct and their work obligations. Notably, notwithstanding this on-going struggle and negotiation, the women in the study did not appear to compromise on their career aspirations.

Significantly, older workers appeared to be exempt from prevailing codes of good conduct for women. In contrast to respondents in early and mid-career, none of the women in late career talked about having to engage in the kind of navigating and negotiating described above. Swaneetha, a university professor, explained that although as an 'old woman' she was free to network with men as she saw fit, the situation would have been completely different if she was a 'young and pretty girl'. Thus our data seemed to suggest that rules of moral behaviour apply mainly to younger women in Sri Lankan organizations, leaving older women exempt.

Discussion

Based on the findings of our study, we make two contributions to the very limited understandings of the significance of 'respectable femininity' for women's careers. First, we offer empirical evidence which highlights how Sri Lankan women account for 'respectability' in their career enactment. The majority of our respondents argued that demonstrating good moral behaviour is vital in winning respect from colleagues and superiors (Whitehead, 2005), which is crucial to their survival in organizations and to their career progress. In addition, we reported on the ways in which women attempted to conform to these expectations in order to guarantee their respectable reputations. Significantly, the older women in our sample were exempt from these moral imperatives. Older women's status as mature and wise elders in Sri Lankan society (Perera, 1991) may have contributed to them being above prevailing norms that governed younger women.

Apart from age, we did not find any other variations in our data with regard to the perceived importance of respectability for career advancement and survival in organizations. However, we recognize that our sample is homogeneous, comprising highly skilled socially privileged women from predominantly Buddhist backgrounds and therefore our findings may not be generalizable

across the Sri Lankan context. Significantly, some of the Victorian literature portrays respectability as a classed phenomenon, highlighting how upper-class women distinguished themselves from working-class women by not frequenting public spaces like taverns (see Skeggs, 1997). In a study of women in India, Radhakrishnan (2009) similarly conceptualizes respectability as part and parcel of being a socially privileged professional woman. Indeed, in this sense, the norms of respectable behaviour highlighted in our data could be more applicable to privileged women in Sri Lanka. Having said that, studies of working-class women employed in the Sri Lankan garment sector have similarly indicated respectability as a central concern (see Lynch, 2007) and these findings suggest that moral behaviour is important for women's survival throughout South Asia. Nevertheless, we do not completely rule out the possibility of variations and thus we call upon scholars to further develop our findings by researching into the interplay between respectability and career across women from different social backgrounds, religious faiths and organizational sectors in South Asia.

Second, we illustrate how norms of respectability have the potential to impact on highly skilled Sri Lankan women's career agency — in particular their capacity to network and engage in influence behaviours. Respondents agreed that weak ties in social networks are vital for developing careers in Sri Lanka. However, early and mid-career women networked cautiously and selectively since extensive contact with casual male acquaintances is not tolerated from respectable women (Phadke, 2007). Scholars argue that women are disadvantaged in social capital due to being left out of male-dominated networks (Cabrera, 2007), and our findings provide insights into how women restrict themselves from social networks because of concerns about respectability.

In the case of influence behaviours, because women were restricted from night-time socializing, they were not able to demonstrate their availability to important organizational stakeholders (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010) or ingratiate themselves with superiors to secure their sponsorship (Burt, 1998). According to Sommerlad (2002), the generation of new business through informal socializing with clients is becoming an important avenue for career progression in contemporary organizations. However, in conforming to the rules of good behaviour (which also underpinned career advancement), women's availability to their male clients was necessarily restricted. This was seen to lead to career disadvantage. Likewise, women who attend organizational events at night selectively not only end up displeasing superiors and damaging their career prospects, but also contribute to maintaining the very rules which disadvantage them (Burr, 1995).

The question then arises, how did the women in this sample account for the contradictory demands placed on them by organizations? Notably, in their interviews respondents never explicitly mentioned these requirements as competing. Rather, they described how they constantly manoeuvred themselves around notions of respectable femininity and their obligations to work in pursuit of their career aspirations. The notion of 'double think' could be used to explain this contradiction in women's accounts, where they neither acknowledged the paradox nor experienced it as uncomfortable (El-Sawad *et al.*, 2004). From the organizational side, although career structures (formal and informal) made no allowances for gendered social norms, managers and bosses appeared to turn a blind eye to women's manoeuvring and in many instances seemed to actively encourage it. The point is that this very rigid morality was not simply brought from outside, rather organizations fully expected respectable femininity from their female workforce, sanctioning behaviours which conflicted with prevailing moral rules. However, since respectability operated as a self-disciplining technique which generated acceptance, the blame for women's lack of career progression could easily be placed on societal pressure rather than on the organization. Indeed in this sense respectable femininity served as a resource for organizations to explain women workers' legitimate lack of progression.

While the colonial literature highlights the centrality of respectability for women's survival in society (Whitehead, 2005) and the South Asian literature provides insight into how women negotiate around notions of good behaviour (Lynch, 2007; Radhakrishnan, 2009), these studies do not consider the potential for such manoeuvring to impact on women's careers. Scholars agree that influence behaviours such as self-promotion is essential for women's career progression, particularly to make up for their deficit in social capital (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2010). But the women in our sample

found it difficult to engage in self-promotion due to prevailing moral behavioural expectations. Moreover, based on our data, we would argue that ingratiating oneself with male superiors is inconsistent with prevailing notions of respectability. Our findings not only add a perspective of constraint to the very agentic idea of career self-management (Z. King, 2004) but they also reveal a moral dimension to the unseen barriers which hinder women's career progression described by metaphors such as the glass ceiling (Cotter *et al.*, 2001).

Significantly, we do not feel that this moral dimension is a unique feature of women's careers in South Asian countries such as Sri Lanka. On the contrary, we suggest that although they have not featured in career debates for many years and indeed might appear anachronistic, moral expectations are still prevalent in careers more generally. The problem in Western societies is that respectability is not spoken about in as explicit a manner as they are in countries such as India and Sri Lanka, and thus as a research topic it does not loom large. It may be that talk of gendered moral behaviour is seen as outdated in societies that are held to be modern, liberal and diverse. However, various studies highlight how women experience being 'othered' (Lyng, 2010; Watts, 2010) and we would argue that there could be a powerful moral dimension to this positioning. Our findings illuminate how women actively negotiate within rules of respectable femininity in pursuit of their career goals and effectively reproduce these rules in the process (Burr, 1995). We argue that it is essential to introduce issues of respectability into careers research. By examining the interplay between respectable femininity and career in a context where respectability is vividly expressed, we provide an important starting point to explore the more subtle ways in which it could be played out elsewhere. Thus we call upon scholars to develop our work further by considering the following: what are the imperatives of respectability in more economically developed western societies?; to what extent are they gendered?; to what extent does age exempt individuals from these imperatives?; how do these imperatives apply across different ethnic groups?; how do people respond to them? and what is the potential of such moral rules to impact on individuals' career agency? These questions are still to be answered.

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