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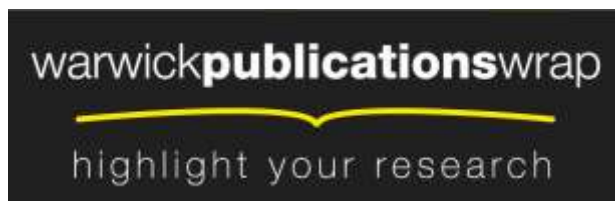
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Exploring the interplay between Buddhism and career development: a study of highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka

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Exploring the interplay between Buddhism and career development: a study of highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka

This article adopts a socio cultural lens to examine the role of Buddhism in highly skilled women workers' careers in Sri Lanka. While Buddhism enabled women's career development by giving them strength to cope with difficult situations in work, it also seemed to restrict their agency and constrain their career advancement. Based on our findings, we argue that being perceived as a good Buddhist woman worked as a powerful form of career capital for the respondents in our sample, who used their faith to combat gender disadvantage in their work settings.

Key words: Buddhism, Religion, Career, Women, Gender, Work Organisations

Introduction

This paper examines the interplay between Buddhism, gender and career. In modernizing societies, women are participating in the labour market in increasing numbers and aspiring to high levels in organizations (Budhwar et al. 2005). However, they are at the same time, charged with preserving national identity (Turner, 2011), through their adherence to religious rituals (Perera, 1997). Given the widely documented roles played by Christianity and Islam in legitimizing traditional gender roles (Gaitskell, 1990), we could expect this to be problematic for women's career development. However there is little empirical work on gender, religion and work to help us understand these issues further. Through our study of highly skilled, socially privileged Buddhist women in Sri Lanka, a country on the threshold of modernization, where Buddhism is an institutionalized state religion (Ameer, 1992), we provide new insights into this important area. Given the dearth of attention to the role of Buddhism in individuals' careers, our study is exploratory. In contrast to extant understandings (Anderson, 2006), we argue that faith is seen as a body of knowledge and a set of social imperatives, which are used flexibly by women in pursuit of their career goals.

Gender, work and religion: the story so far

The literature on gender and religion is divided among studies that for women emphasize an incompatibility between faith and work, and those which do not reveal this inconsistency. With respect to the former, monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam which privilege women's roles and responsibilities in the domestic arena (Anderson, 2006) are seen to inhibit their participation in the labour force. From this perspective women who are highly religious are less likely to enter the labour force since they strongly favour traditional family roles. Second difficulties in harmonizing home and work have been linked

to lower levels of involvement in religious activity (Read, 2004). This view confines religion to mainly the private sphere (Davie, 1990) depicting faith as something people do in their personal time but which is not related to public activity.

However, a small but growing literature takes issue with this view. For example, in Africa and America, the church is seen to provide women with opportunities for education and leadership (Anderson, 2006), encouraging them to achieve (Gifford, 1998; Spinks, 2002). Furthermore religious affiliation can help women to cope with personal (Griffith, 1997) and workplace (Constantine et al. 2006) challenges. Finally, the psychological literature on religion and career highlights the positive effects of religiosity on motivation and career commitment (Duffy and Bluestein, 2005).

In light of these contrasting views, this ==exploratory study== into Buddhist women's careers in Sri Lanka, provide insights into what we see as a more complex relationship between women's faith and their career enactment.

Women's careers aspirations

In the literature on career success, in contrast to men whose career aspirations are characterized by 'objective' factors like hierarchical advancement and remuneration, women's goals are described in terms of values such as personal accomplishment, interesting work and recognition (Sturges, 1999; Lirio et al. 2007). Taking issue with this largely Western literature, studies have shown how South Asian women prioritize hierarchical advancement (Authors, 2011; Budhwar et al. 2005) and financial security (Author B et al. 2009). For instance the professional women in Budhwar et al.'s (2005) study in India sought senior positions in their organisations and were willing to make career-family trade-offs to achieve this.

While such studies complicate conventional understandings by providing a national perspective, a small stream of research yields insights into the influences of social class. Like Budhwar's ambitious Indian respondents, socially privileged women in North America (Lapour and Heppner, 2008) and the UK (James, 2008) are seen to aspire for high status occupations which provide good financial imperatives and clear paths to advancement. These findings show that women's career aspirations are not simply a reflection of their value systems, but are also influenced by factors such as remuneration and social status.

Buddhism, work and women

Buddhism is the oldest religion in the world, originating in Nepal in the sixth century BCE (Giddens, 2009). A central theme within Buddhism is that nothing is permanent (Schumann, 2007) and that all beings follow a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Buddhism promotes a belief in 'Karma', that all occurrences are based on the law of cause and effect (Niles, 1999). One's fate in this life is shaped by the good and bad deeds committed in previous lifetimes. Individuals cannot escape the consequences of actions in former existences, but in present life everybody has a free will to decide how to act (see Schumann, 2007) and these actions influence their prospects in current and future lifetimes.

Life, according to the Buddha is marked by pain, decay and suffering (Nyanatiloka, 2000), which can only be eliminated when one escapes the iterative cycle of birth and death (Schumann, 2007). This can be achieved through moral conduct, intense mental concentration (meditation) and developing one's wisdom, defined as realising the impermanence of everything in life and freeing oneself from all desires (Daniels, 1998). This review shows how different Buddhism is from other religions prescribing individual responsibility for salvation (Niles, 1999) as opposed to asking gods for blessings for a

==trouble-free life.== ==The latter might be seen as an abdication of personal responsibility because individuals put gods in charge of their prospects in life rather than taking responsibility themselves.==

Max Weber is one the first scholars to look at Buddhism in the context of work. Weber was interested in whether non-European civilizations had the religious and cultural resources necessary for capitalism (as he saw Protestantism as providing in Europe and North America) (Gellner, 2008). In his examination of the economic ethics of Hinduism and Buddhism, Weber argued that Buddhism is inconsistent with societies' capitalist development (Weber, 1916-1917; Weber et al. 2000). First, he proposed that the notion of Karma led to people accepting their lot, making them unlikely to seek change. Second, he suggested that Buddhists concentrate solely on themselves in pursuit of Nirvana, inhibiting the social interactions necessary for economic development (Schumaan, 2007). Weber's (1916-1917) arguments are not without challenge (==Schumann, 2007==). For example, scholars argue that ordinary people in Buddhist societies do not detach themselves from material desires since they have other aspirations apart from reaching Nirvana (Obeyesekere, 1963). The more general criticism here is that there are gaps between the theory and practice of Buddhism, and one cannot base speculations about societies' development on abstract religious philosophies (Daniels, 1998).

The role of gender in Buddhism is controversial. Although the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth suggests that there is no male or female per se, but only a single karmic stream (De Silva, 1994), in practice most Buddhists talk and act as if gender *really exists* (Gross, 2004). Significantly while the Buddha regarded men and women as equal in their potential for enlightenment, they were treated unequally. For instance the Buddha was initially reluctant to allow women to join the Buddhist order (Schak, 2008): since the public may perceive

nuns as ==companions== for monks, a group of women living independently of men was socially unacceptable, and for such a group safety would be a concern (Sponberg, 1985). However the Buddha later agreed to a women's order, ensuring male monks precedence in matters of salutation (De Silva, 1994) and prohibiting female monks from observing the annual retreat (vassa) alone. While the former is an explicit example of sexism within the early practice of Buddhism, the latter is more subtle, ==implying that women should not wonder about alone unprotected.==

There are very few studies on women's ==roles== in Buddhism. While Buddhism allows women to pursue a religious career in contrast to some forms of Christianity and Islam, women can do this in a regulated context that maintains the conventional gender order (Sponberg, 1985). Nevertheless in most contemporary Buddhist societies, nuns experience equality with monks, undertaking a variety of duties in Buddhist organisations and with opportunities for education and travel (Schak, 2008).

Women play major roles in maintaining the rituals associated with Buddhism in Asian societies. For example, Schak (2008) writes about lay women's roles such as volunteering, and philanthropy in Taiwan's Buddhist groups. Significantly however, like the churches in Africa and America noted earlier (Anderson, 2006) these groups give women the opportunity to teach and occupy leadership positions leading to the development of work related skills. Some women are given opportunities to travel abroad to disaster areas where they can expand their knowledge of the world and their social networks (Schak, 2008): ==in Mayrofher et al.'s (2004) terms== their career capital (resources valuable within the social context individuals' careers unfolds and thus helps them to progress in their careers). ==So although Buddhist faith has the potential to constrain work and career (Weber et al. 2000;==

Sri Lankan context

Sri Lanka has a population of about 20 million people, 70% of whom are Buddhists. Minority religious groups include Christians, Muslims and Hindus. Sri Lanka is characterised by conventional gender ideologies (Lynch, 1999) extended family relations, intergenerational caring obligations (Perera, 1991) and social divisions. However the socio-cultural position of women is favourable when compared to other South Asian countries. There is widespread acceptance of education and employment for women (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997), and the 2009 Labour Force Survey identified 90% of females as literate.

Turning to the Sri Lankan labour market, over 7.0 million people were employed during the year 2009 (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009): 4.9 million (65%) males and 2.6 million (36%) females, suggesting a male dominated market. Women account for 50% of clerical jobs, 34.7% of sales jobs and 33.3% of elementary occupations. However, only 2.0% of women as opposed to 9.6% of men are employed as machine operators, highlighting occupational gender segregation. Interestingly women comprise 63.2% of the total professionals in Sri Lanka, but only 20% of senior officials and managers (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). Since there do not appear to be shortages in women's skill sets, this indicates barriers to women's advancement in Sri Lankan organisations.

Buddhism is a key social institution in Sri Lanka. All state owned television and radio channels commence and cease the day with Buddhist prayers, and all days significant to the life of Buddha are declared as national holidays. Scholars argue that Buddhism forms a core part of the national identity of the Sinhalese, the major ethnic group in Sri Lanka

(Gunawardana, 1990). Buddhist nationalism has been linked to the long civil war in Sri Lanka between the Sri Lankan government and the mainly Hindu separatist group, the Tamil Tigers (De Voss, 2007). This war recently saw a military solution; however Buddhist fundamentalism continues to rise with monks protesting against conversions of Buddhists to other religions (Deegalle, 2006) and the building of mosques in pre-historic Buddhist cities. Notably, religion is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum offering students a choice between Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

Women play particularly important roles in Buddhist temples where they assume leadership in temple events and activities. According to Perera (1997) women in Sri Lanka are expected to transmit the country's traditions (including those associated with Buddhism) to future generations. Significantly, Buddhist rituals are also part of most public and private organisations. Buddhist priests are invited for significant events such as opening a new branch and commemorating corporate anniversaries and some companies hold religious ceremonies for their employees (Airforce, 2012). Notably a few private sector companies also provide religious services for their minority staff members (Ceylon today, 2012) and host Christmas parties for all employees. However these Christmas parties do not involve religious rituals or association to the Christian church.

To summarize, Buddhism is seen to have the potential to constrain women's work and career although there is also evidence that it can likewise be used for their empowerment. However our understandings of the relationship between Buddhism and women's employment are limited. It is important to explore the role Buddhist faith plays in highly skilled Sri Lankan women's careers because Buddhism is an institutionalized state religion in Sri Lanka in which women have significant responsibilities. Moreover given that Sri Lankan women remain underrepresented in senior posts, it is crucial to investigate whether

Buddhist faith has any impact on women's career advancement (or the lack of it) as the literature on monotheistic religions suggest (Gaitskell, 1990). In this this paper we examine whether Buddhism is best conceptualised as a wholly determining set of principles which leads to particular forms of work and career behaviour for women (e.g. Anderson, 2006) or an important form of cultural hegemony. We address these issues by examining how highly skilled Buddhist women in Sri Lanka account for the interplay between Buddhism, gender and career.

Research Design

Our study is based on one-to-one face-to-face interviews with 21 women who identified themselves as Buddhists: eight in early career (ages 24-35), six in mid-career (ages 36-45), and seven in late career (ages 46-60). Ten respondents worked for private organisations in Sri Lanka at the time of the interview, while eleven were in the public sector. We included similar numbers of respondents from private and public organisations because of their contrasting pay structures and organisational cultures. Private organisations in Sri Lanka are considered to be high payers and to have 'modern', western-influenced cultures, where superiors are addressed by first names, work-life policies are widely available and career paths are based on individual performance. Public organisations, in contrast, are typically poor paymasters characterised by traditional bureaucratic cultures and career paths based on time served (Authors, 2011). Our respondents worked in medicine, finance, banking, sales and marketing, education and engineering (see Table 1). Notably our sample does not include self-employed women or those in informal sectors. While acknowledging this limitation, we restricted our sample to formal organisations because we were particularly interested in exploring how women enact their careers within these boundaries (reflecting the careers literature more generally). However we would not wish to imply that careers only happen in such contexts.

Respondents were qualified to graduate level or above. Seventeen were married and had children, while the four unmarried women were in early career. Respondents were identified through a snowballing sampling method (Noy, 2008). All of the women were from Colombo the capital and experienced considerable social privilege living in desirable neighbourhoods, employing domestic aides and educating their children in leading schools in the country and/or renowned universities abroad.

In interviews that lasted between two and three hours, women unfolded their career stories. Notably, we did not directly mention Buddhism. However in response to questions such as 'what are the challenges you encountered in your career and how did you deal with them?' they talked passionately about how Buddhism helped them to cope with difficult situations (e.g. .illness and death) while carrying on with work and career. When asked about important career resources, a number of respondents explained that some 'external power' is necessary to ensure that homes run smoothly, making it possible for them to focus on their work. Here, women referred to the powers of Hindu gods widely worshipped by Buddhists in Sri Lanka to intervene in their troubles. Women also spoke of how much of their time was devoted to participating in Buddhist activities with their families. Thus Buddhism (entangled with Hindu gods as practiced in Sri Lanka) emerged as a significant theme in our data. This prompted us to return to our respondents in separate phone or Skype interviews, to ask them explicitly about the role that Buddhism plays in their work and career.

All the interviews were conducted in English since it was respondents' first language. They were not digitally recorded because the women did not wish to have their voices on computer files, so the first author took copious notes of respondents' narratives using

shorthand. This was a challenging process which was practically achieved by pausing after each answer to write verbatim notes, extending the length of an interview to over three hours in most cases. Following the interviews the first author completed the transcripts. In each case this was presented to the interviewee to make sure that everything she said had been correctly captured. Respondents were also contacted through email, Skype and telephone for further clarifications. Empirical themes were initially identified during the data collection itself since data collection and analysis were undertaken in parallel (Silverman, 2009). The main data analysis technique was template analysis. Following King's (2004) approach, we first developed a list of codes representing the key themes. These were identified in relation to the literature reviewed, the first author's experience of the context, and the themes raised by respondents. However we sought out contrasting and minority views to ensure that our analysis was based on all respondents' voices rather than just the dominant majority. Once the initial codes were defined, we allocated sections of data notes to the appropriate themes. The Nvivo 8 software package was used to facilitate data coding. The template was modified in the process of coding, using Hammersley and Atkinson's (1997) notion of 'progressive focusing'. We split the dominant themes into subsidiary categories and amalgamated some subsidiary categories together as the analysis developed. We read and re-read the contents of each theme and wrote these up as narratives, retaining verbatim quotations. In other words we produced a 'coherent story' of each data theme (King, 2004). We focused on the relationships and associations between themes rather than analysing the individual themes alone, gauging overriding patterns and relationships by reading the data ourselves and trying to understand the 'big picture'.

Findings

Following the literature reviewed earlier on sexism within the Buddhist order (see Sponberg, 1985) and the view of Sri Lankan women as Buddhist 'torch- bearers' (see Perera, 1997), we

might expect Buddhism to be at odds with high powered, 'modern' careers for women. However our data revealed a much more complex picture which we present in the sections that follow.

Buddhism and women's career advancement

Given our interest in how Sri Lankan women accounted for their careers, it is important to consider, what women sought to achieve in career terms. It is striking that all of our respondents aspired to reach the highest possible level in their organisational hierarchies:

The day I become a director I would feel that my career has been successful (Dilhari, 46)

Ultimate career success to me would be if I become a top consultant (Roshini, 28)

The women in our sample understood career success as hierarchical advancement (Arthur et al., 2005). This was essential to enhance not only their own but also their families' social statuses (Lapour and Heppner, 2008). In what follows we will explore how these women accounted for the interplay between religion, gender and work in realising their career aspirations.

Sixteen respondents explained that Buddhism gave them the strength to cope with difficult situations in work and life, thus enabling them to pursue their career aspirations (Constantine et al., 2006). Vandana talked about how living by Buddhist principles of maintaining perfect control of the mind and emotions at all times (Nyanatiloka, 2000) helped her get through her working day and gave her the strength to face whatever came in her way at work:

13 | Page

I have never been out of control – whatever comes in my way I have been able to accept it and make the best of it. In dealing with my colleagues or customers, I am able to keep my temper at all times. I never get depressed or angry about anything. My main motive is to live by Buddhist principles, do the right thing, make an honest living and do my duty by everybody. This thinking has helped me be happy at both work and home (Vandana, 38)

Similarly Kishani explained how the law of cause and effect (Payutto and Olsson, 1995) and the notion of rebirth in Buddhism (Nyanatiloka, 2000) helped her reconcile herself to her parents' sudden deaths and to remain steadfast in her career development. Kishani was able to continue with her work without taking a break since she believed that they would be reborn in a good place. She found peace in the Buddha's teaching that nothing in life is permanent (Payutto and Olsson, 1995), which enabled her to carry on. Two respondents talked about how Buddhist ideologies of being thankful for what you have (Nyanatiloka, 2000) helped them to cope with family members' illnesses and to stay focused on pursuing their career goals.

From quite a different perspective, several women discussed how they looked to Buddhism, and in particular to the concept of 'fate' (Payutto and Olsson, 1995), to explain favourable and unfavourable career outcomes, implying that individuals would progress in career only if their fate allowed them to do so. In Kanthi's words:

I suppose whatever you do and however much you try – you should have career progress in your fate. Both my sisters were much brighter than me, hardworking than me but I had a more successful career than them (Kanthi, 52)

Kanthi, who worked as a director in the civil service, did not see her sisters' careers in teaching as successful or prestigious. In her view, the fact that she ended up as a director in a government department while her sisters were teachers was not a matter of preference or aptitude, but rather a matter of fate. Vandana similarly spoke about how career progression was determined by destiny, regardless of how hard one worked for it. By placing so much emphasis on fate and destiny in determining career outcomes, these women were indeed undermining the power of individual agency in shaping individuals' careers. Dilhari talked about how fate and luck determined her chances of obtaining a directorship in her organisation:

> *I don't know whether I would ever be a director. Anyway I will accept whatever comes in my way gratefully – you can't have everything what you want however much you try – your fate, luck everything plays a part. I am grateful for what I have so far… that's what Buddha said to us – 'be happy with what you have'* (Dilhari, 46)

It is particularly interesting that while we might read this recourse to fate as an abdication of personal agency, every one of the respondents spoke extensively about how they shaped their careers through their own actions, typically through strategies like manipulation (Authors, 2011). For instance, many respondents explained how they ingratiated themselves with their superiors by giving compliments and doing favours (Appelbaum and Hughes, 1998) in order to enhance their career prospects:

> *I spent a lot of effort in trying to get close to the Director of our department. Sweet talked him, and did everything what it takes. You know the director gives his opinion to the governor about who he thinks should be the Assistant Director of the*

department – I just wanted to be sure that he nominated my name over others. I didn't have to go to this extent since I was the most senior candidate. But I didn't want to take any chances anyway (Dilhari, 46)

This excerpt highlights how Dilhari strategically sought to ensure that she was promoted to assistant director. This is contradictory to her previous statement where she emphasised that she does not chase after desirable career statuses, but rather accepts any outcome as part of her fate or karma, in line with the Buddha's teachings. This theme will be developed later on in the paper.

This strong sense of personal agency permeated our respondents' accounts. Four women from the public sector explained how they attempted to circumvent their organisations' time-served based career paths by drawing the boards' attention to their exceptional performance. Most respondents talked about how they actively competed for the few senior positions available through networking. These examples indicate that women certainly believed that they could change their existing statuses through their actions, and worked hard to improve their circumstances.

A significant way respondents attempted to enhance their careers was praying to Hindu gods for success. Although Buddhism does not encourage worshipping deities (Obeysekere, 1963), several women attributed success in career to their spiritual relationships with various Hindu gods. Madhavi who identified herself as a Buddhist deemed the blessings of goddess Kali as a key resource in her career advancement:

My refuge is Kali amma (a Hindu goddess). *She has never once left my side. Some external power is important to make sure that children don't get sick, parents are*

healthy, and servants don't take off suddenly. I was extremely lucky to have had no

problems when I started off my career (Madhavi, 48)

In Sri Lankan households characterised by conventional gender divisions of domestic labour (Lynch, 1999), career women relied on domestic aides to run their households while they are at work and as Madhavi highlights, depended on Hindu gods to ensure that these aides did not leave. In this sense gods were seen to not only give women spiritual strength to manage their lives, but also to practically intervene and make things happen for them. Indeed it was interesting that our respondents who presented themselves as staunch Buddhists dipped into Hinduism when they felt that it would be helpful to enhance their material well-being and career progress (questing in Woodhead's 2007 terms). Significantly this is in stark contrast to the Buddha's teachings which prescribe individual responsibility for salvation rather than relying on deities (Obeysekere, 1963). Indeed these data highlight that women are not simply passive recipients of religion but rather active agents in selectively using religion to nourish and facilitate their sense of personal agency (Woodhead, 2007).

Being a good Buddhist woman at work

Notwithstanding women's considerable manoeuvring between the imperatives of Buddhism and their career aspirations, the importance of presenting themselves as good Buddhist women, deeply influenced by Buddhist values and maintaining its traditions, was a striking feature of our data. When asked directly about the role of their faith in career progression, women agreed that Buddhist faith was a mark of ethicality and credibility:

Buddhism is most honoured supreme power in Sri Lanka. The Buddha represents the truth. So followers of the Buddha are associated with honesty and good values. (Rupika, 54)

Significantly, this was seen to be important not only in general, societal terms, but was also crucial at the level of women's work organisations. In the following extract Natasha associates religiousness with good moral character, a feature that was seen to open doors to senior ==organisational== positions in the leading state owned newspaper she worked for:

Bosses are always more partial towards people who know a lot about Buddhism. Such people are thought to be very good. This is very implicit but it certainly happens at work. I am a Buddhist but I am not that religious. I think it is absurd to flaunt your faith. But many people at work do this and I think it certainly helps in their careers. Having your bosses' respect is important for promotion. And even insignificant workers in smaller positions have more respect for people who talk Buddhism at work – so it does help in leadership positions since people are more likely to embrace what you say (Natasha, 25)

Natasha implies that Buddhism works as a form of cultural hegemony which is important for acceptance and survival in her organisation. Indeed this somewhat explains the contradiction in Dilhari's account above where she drew on Buddhist discourses of fate (Payutto and Olsson, 1995) to explain her career enactment although she did not necessarily follow these teachings in practice. In other words, Dilhari appeared to be performing a culturally appropriate role useful for her acceptance at work. Amongst our respondents then Buddhism can be seen as a crucial form of career capital (Mayrofher et al. 2004).

Notably as the data highlight individuals seem to be very much aware of this situation and thus strategically invoke Buddhist discourses to further their careers. Significantly, women's invocation of Buddhist discourses at work indicates that religion is not an activity restricted to only the private sphere (Davies, 1990).

Kalpana who works in Hospitality Management for a leading private sector company talked about how women who perform Buddhism conform to the stereotype of the ideal Sri Lankan woman and are thereby likely to surpass equally qualified but less religious women in promotion:

> I think Buddhist faith is more important for women's careers than men's. In Sri Lanka women are sort of expected to be religious – especially older women. Men are not really expected to talk about Buddhism all the time and be involved in their temples. But women are. So Buddhism is an essential element of the ideal Sri Lankan woman. The woman who fits this 'ideal woman' stereotype by going to temple regularly etc. obviously has more chances of progressing in their organisations. They are going to be the favourite candidate for a prospective position against other non-religious women (Kalpana, 36)

Here Kalpana depicts the 'ideal' Sri Lankan woman as one who fulfils Buddhist social norms and conventions. Notably it was not only their behaviours at work that counted, but also the extent to which women fulfilled their wider social obligations (Radhakrishnan, 2009). For example, involvement in the temple was a priority and respondents spoke of their frequent attendance, their financial contributions to monks and chauffeuring elderly relatives to and from temple activities highlighting how material rewards which resulted from their career success often enabled them to fulfil these duties. While Kalpana's account cannot be

generalised across the Sri Lankan context, she hints at religious based discrimination at work suggesting that some organisations base selection and promotion on individuals' faith rather than work specific criteria. Indeed this again highlights that Buddhism is an important career resource for Sri Lankans, especially for women (Mayrofher et al. 2004).

Significantly respondents also talked about how being a good Buddhist enabled women to prosper in male dominated spheres, providing them with much needed credibility and legitimacy that served as buffers against gender related prejudices:

For the first time our logistics department hired a lady for the position transportation manager. Everybody knows that this is a job for a man. It involves dealing with drivers who are quite rough men. But this lady (the new transportation manager) had a reputation for being a very credible individual and an excellent communicator. She refers to Buddhist teachings all the time and people respect what she says. Anyway the management thought that she would be an ideal candidate for this position because she could influence others to embrace good values and the drivers are likely to respect her advice since she talks in terms of Buddhism (Nishanya, 36)

Nishanya worked for a private organisation which celebrated all the days significant to the life of the Buddha encouraging employees to participate in these events. By explicitly highlighting that her employer recruits spiritual people for positions of leadership so that they could influence others to embrace good values, leading to less chances of pilfering etc., she suggests that her organisation strategically uses Buddhist spirituality to manage performance (Kamoche and Pinnington, 2012) while simultaneously engaging in faith based discrimination (Bell et al. 2011). According to Nishanya, such a situation gives women who perform Buddhism a competitive edge over male candidates for leadership positions.

Women might choose religion as a buffer against discrimination as opposed to discourses of equality and women's liberation since they perceive this as a culturally acceptable way to wriggle themselves to the top rather than explicitly challenging their subordinated status and risking isolation in the process (Powell et al. 2009). However by using Buddhism to combat gender discrimination, we would argue that women are effectively reproducing their status as the group responsible for safeguarding prevailing traditions and rituals, including those in the home (Woodhead, 2007).

Discussion

Our data thus present a rich and varied picture of the interplay between Buddhism, gender and career in Sri Lanka. First, based on the evidence presented, we would argue that research into this relationship must go beyond considering women as simply passive recipients of religious doctrines (e.g. Gaitskell, 1990), focusing instead on the ways in which people draw on and use religion in their daily lives. For instance, rather than attempting to attain salvation by renouncing attachments (Weber et al. 2000) or devoting their entire lives to maintaining Buddhist rituals (Schak, 2008) our respondents spoke of how the material prosperity which resulted from their career success enabled them to fulfil their roles as good Buddhist women, including donating alms to monks and providing for their extended family members. Indeed respondents recounted numerous examples of how they strategically took charge of their career development, using their faith to cope with the difficult situations they encountered at home and work (Griffith, 1997) and spiritually invoking Hindu gods when Buddhism failed to provide the particular support they needed to advance (Woodhead, 2007).

As illustrated, there was at the same time considerable talk of fate and several respondents described their careers (at different points) as a matter of destiny rather than personal

choice or action. Thus, there was a significant contradiction in women's accounts where at times faith was linked to a strong invocation of personal agency, but in other instances resulted in an abdication of such agency. We argue that such behaviour was largely motivated by women's desire for cultural acceptance (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Indeed in every case the 'surrender' of agency (due to faith) was juxtaposed to examples of highly strategic behaviour, and descriptions of how women carefully managed the impressions they made as well as their workplace relationships. Thus what we found was considerable manoeuvring as women selectively invoked aspects of their Buddhist faith to support/justify/legitimise their career accounts, while carefully upholding their self-presentation as 'good, Buddhist women'. Thus in our data faith was not depicted as a wholly determining set of principles which led to particular forms of work and career behaviour for women (e.g. Anderson, 2006) but instead was presented as a body of knowledge and a set of social imperatives, that were used flexibly by women in pursuit of their career goals. Indeed this capacity to actively navigate between faith and work could be expected from socially privileged professional women who have been described as highly ambitious (James, 2008).

Second, we would argue that for our respondents Buddhism can be seen as a powerful form of career capital (Mayrofher et al. 2004). Our data shows how women who profess Buddhism at work are associated with credibility, while those who emphasise their involvement in temple life are seen as ideal women (Radhakrishnan, 2009). These factors not only helped respondents climb up their organisations' hierarchies, but in some cases also buffered gender discrimination when good Buddhist women were chosen for leadership positions reserved for male candidates since they were perceived as having the potential to pass on moral values to their subordinates. So rather than collectively invoking discourses of equal opportunity, the women in our sample chose to perform Buddhism in a

very public but highly individualistic way in order to create a good impression and to combat gender discrimination. Given that the former risked disturbing the status quo in organisations which subordinated women, and also challenged national identity that closely confirms women's place in the private sphere (Radhakrishnan, 2009), our respondents chose to craft their careers within the boundaries placed on them, attempting to draw on the same factors which contributed towards their marginalisation (Schak, 2008) to their advantage. However by using religion to combat gender inequalities at work, women reinstated their status as society's moral guardians (Perera, 1997) providing spiritual sustenance and passing on Buddhist traditions both at home and in the workplace. Women were thus depicted as having significant social obligations, in contrast to men who appeared to be free to develop their careers without these ancillary concerns. We would argue that such normative assumptions consolidated the rigidly unequal system of gender relationships within both work contexts and wider society. These findings make a significant contribution to the few studies on women in modernising societies which highlight how women use culturally appropriate discourses to craft acceptable work identities (Radhakrishnan, 2009; Lynch, 1999) without considering the implications of such actions. Furthermore respondents' usage of religion to overcome gender discrimination can be seen as a new gender management strategy used by women to gain acceptance at work (Powell et al. 2009).

Third, our findings show how some organisations in Sri Lanka select mainly Buddhist women for senior positions, thereby potentially leading to faith based discrimination at work. While we do not claim that our data is representative of the entire Sri Lankan context, we propose that in this rapidly changing economic and social environment, having good Buddhist women in senior positions is not only a way of ensuring the highest standards of ethics in organisations (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003) but also a means of providing a crucial sense

of tradition and legitimacy to this fluid context (Turner, 2012). Indeed scholars have argued that the quest towards preserving Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage inextricably linked to Buddhism, leads to the superordination of Buddhists in the country and the subordination of religious minorities (De Votta, 2007). However we need more empirical work to fully understand this dynamic: particularly case studies of Sri Lankan organisations (those defined in terms of Buddhist values, those which are not and organisations which are foreign owned) focusing on how religion impacts on recruitment and selection, promotion, the uptake of training and other similar issues. We also emphasise that it is important to explore religious minority women's accounts of faith and career in countries where a particular religion is institutionalised and organisations are seen to use a particular faith as a tool to achieve their long-term goals (Kamoche and Pinnington, 2012). Also significant are Buddhist men's accounts of faith and career raising questions about whether indeed Buddhism can be seen as a form of cultural hegemony for Sri Lankan men, facilitating their career advancement as we argued it did for women, or are the dynamics between faith and career different for men? Finally our sample comprises highly skilled, socially privileged women from Colombo: the capital of the country. It is important to examine whether the same capacity to actively navigate between faith and career prevails among non-professional women (Read, 2002) and women from rural areas (Amin and Alam, 2008) who scholars have described as more religious than professionals living in urban areas. These questions are still to be answered.

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Table 1: Profiles of respondents

Name	Age	Sector/Industry	Occupations	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)
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
Swanetha	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)
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)

Acknowledgements

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