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Exploring the interplay between gender, organizational context and career: a Sri Lankan perspective

Purpose – This paper explores how highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka navigate organizational contexts via different modes of engagement in pursuit of hierarchical advancement. The purpose of this paper is to contribute new insights into existing understandings of women's careers in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on one-to-one in-depth interviews conducted with 24 Sri Lankan women in early, mid and late career.

Findings – The findings reveal how the women in this sample actively used eight modes of engagement to manage themselves in organizations and vertically advance in their careers. The implications of these modes for organizational contexts and women's careers are highlighted.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the limited literature on women's careers in South Asia and develops existing understandings of modes of engagement individuals use to develop their careers (Duberley *et al.*, 2006; Richardson, 2009; Al-Ariss, 2010; Evetts, 2000).

Key words: Modes of engagement, Women, Career development, Social constructionism

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Introduction

A plethora of research studies has demonstrated work organizations as profoundly gendered, defined in terms of a distinction between men and women (Britton, 2000), and posing considerable challenges to women's careers. Scholars highlight how women in western countries engage with their organizational contexts and in doing so, how they reproduce gendered elements of organizations by shaping their personal lives to suit organizations and explaining fellow women colleagues' unsuccessful career outcomes in terms of their domestic commitments (Lyng, 2010; Bolton and Muzio, 2007). However, little is known about how women from less economically developed non-western nations enact their careers. Indeed the careers literature has been described as largely ethnocentric (Cohen, Arnold and O'Neil, 2011) focusing mainly on individuals situated in more economically developed countries in the West (Cohen and El-Sawad, 2009). Significantly research into South Asian work organizations has found gender to be an even more salient issue than it is in the West, highlighting masculine ideas of leadership (Gupta *et al.*, 1998; Jain and Mukherji, 2010) a general lack of family-friendly policies (see Poster and Prasad, 2005) and a view that women's presence in organizations is still somewhat exceptional (Nath, 2000; Budhwar *et al.,* 2005). In the light of these findings we emphasise that there is an urgent need to better understand how women in these contexts manage themselves within organizations and develop their careers.

In this paper, we explore how highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka navigate organizational contexts via different 'modes of engagement' (Duberley *et al.*, 2006) in order to achieve hierarchical advancement. We hope that these findings will contribute new insights into our limited understandings of women's careers in South Asia. In the following sections, we will first briefly review the few studies which explore individual career actors' 'modes of engagement' (Duberley *et al.*, 2006; Richardson, 2009; Al-Ariss, 2010; Evetts, 2000). Thereafter we will introduce social constructionism (Burr, 2003; Berger and Luckman, 1967) the theoretical approach we are taking in this paper, highlighting its usefulness in offering insights into women's career enactment within organizational contexts, and provide details of our empirical study. Based on our empirical evidence we propose eight modes of engagement which women in Sri Lanka use to navigate their respective organizational

contexts in pursuit of hierarchical advancement. In the concluding discussion we consider the implications of these modes on women's careers as well as the organizational contexts in which they are situated.

Modes of engagement in careers

While considerable research attention has been given to the organizational contexts in which individuals work, much less has considered the ways in which people manoeuvre in these settings. In what follows we briefly discuss some notable exceptions. In their investigation of scientific careers, Duberley, Cohen and Mallon (2006) drew on the Barley structuration model of career (Barley, 1989) to examine how scientists in the UK and New Zealand made sense of and sought to develop their careers within universities and government laboratories. Barley's model is based on Giddens' (1984) idea that structure and action can be seen as inextricably linked, with each sphere implicated in the other: in other words, all human action is at least partly shaped by the contextual rules under which it occurs, while these contextual rules are continuously sustained and/or modified by human action. Applying this model to the case of scientists in New Zealand and UK, Duberley *et al.*'s (2006) findings highlight the dynamic interplay between five institutional contexts: science, profession, family, government and national culture, which scientists saw as both constraining them from and/or enabling them to develop their careers. Duberley *et al.* (2006) propose two modes of engagement: transformation oriented and maintenance oriented, which their respondents adopted to manage perceived contextual constraints on their careers. For instance, some scientists had worked towards change by means such as collaborating with campaign groups to widen women's access to scientific careers, while others had preferred to work within existing structures by means such as developing their disciplines in relation to opportunities available in the market (Duberley *et al.*, 2006).

Richardson (2009) takes a similar approach to Duberley *et al.* (2006) to investigate the modes of engagement adopted by British academics who pursue careers across international boundaries. She identifies three contexts: the science context, the national context and the organizational context, which impact on the way academics develop their careers. In the light of the structural conditions identified in her study, Richardson (2009) argues that an international career is characterized by 'seams' which must be navigated by

the individual. Here seams refer to the tension between the science, national and organizational contexts of academia. Richardson (2009) illustrates how some international academics use 'maintenance' oriented modes of engagement to navigate within structures and develop their careers while others opt for 'transformative' approaches to advance their careers. For instance academics adopting maintenance oriented modes had accepted the employment policies in the countries they relocated to, and worked within these by means such as securing citizenship in the country prior to applying for academic jobs (c.f. Richardson, 2009:166). However, those who adopted transformative modes had drawn on their professional networks to secure jobs in the countries they relocated to, thereby circumventing prevailing national policies.

Al Ariss (2010) develops Richardson's (2009) and Duberley *et al*.'s (2006) work in investigating career development experiences of self-initiated skilled Lebanese migrants to France. The author identifies two structural levels: organizational and national, which migrants perceived to impact on their career development, and illustrates how they navigated these barriers using four modes of engagement: maintenance, transformation, entrepreneurship and opt out. Al-Ariss (2010) builds on Duberley *et al*.'s (2006) and Richardson's (2009) work by identifying these two additional modes of engagement individuals use in their careers: entrepreneurship and opt out. The scholar defines entrepreneurship as migrants commencing new business ventures in order to avoid discrimination and legal constraints in the French context of employment, and opt out as migrants giving up on employment altogether because they could not deal with the legal and discrimination barriers in France (Al-Ariss, 2010).

Evetts (2000) considers how specifically women engage with social structures via different modes of engagement in their careers. Drawing on Giddens' structuration theory (1984) she proposes a dualistic relationship between individuals' actions, structures and cultures to explore women's career change. We suggest that her approach could also be very valuable in illuminating the dynamics of women's career progression. However, where Giddens subsumes culture within his conceptualization of structure, Evetts distinguishes between these dimensions. With respect to cultural dimensions Evetts speaks about belief systems and social attitudes which influence individual behavior by imposing definitions of what is accepted as 'natural' and 'appropriate' and thereby impacts on individuals' occupational

choices and career aspirations. With respect to structural processes Evetts (2000) talks about career paths within organizations and divisions of labor within organizations and families. In Evetts' view (2000) cultural beliefs and controlling social attitudes about women support structural arrangements within work organizations and families. The key point in her argument however is that women's careers are not determined in a direct, causal way by structural and cultural factors, but rather women are able to choose between the opportunities available to them to some extent. From this perspective, Evetts (2000) argues that women will experience and deal with inequalities and constraints in different ways which she identifies as adaptation, manipulation, negotiation, resistance and/or confrontation.

We found all the above studies (Duberley *et al.,* 2006; Richardson, 2009; Al-Ariss, 2010; Evetts, 2000) valuable since they illustrate how individuals actively and continuously deal with opportunities and constraints that emanate from their social contexts, in order to develop their careers. Thus these analyses offer an excellent starting point for investigating the ways in which women in Sri Lanka engage with their organizational contexts in pursuit of their career goals. In this paper we develop the above studies (Duberley *et al*., 2006; Richardson, 2009; Al-Ariss, 2010; Evetts, 2000) to build a conceptual framework for understanding highly skilled women's career strategies in Sri Lanka. We are interested in how women enact their careers in the light of their representations of organizational contexts, and in doing so how they impact on these contexts in which they are situated. Thus we used a social constructionist approach (Young and Collin, 2004) to investigate this recursive relationship between individuals and their organisations.

Social constructionism

In this paper we use social constructionism to understand how women engage with organizational contexts in order to advance in their careers. Social constructionism is a relativist epistemological position based on the notion of the social world being constructed by individuals themselves through their social practices (Cassell and Symon, 2004), rather than being a fixed and/or objective entity which is external to individuals and impacts on them in deterministic ways (Cohen *et al*., 2004). As Weick has argued, people are part of their environments and through their actions they contribute to the creation of 'the

materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face' (1995:31). From this perspective reality can be seen as an on-going and dynamic process, constantly reproduced by people acting upon their representations of it.

Drawing on Burr (1995) we summarize social constructionism in terms of five key points. First social constructionists argue that the world we experience and the people we find ourselves to be are the product of social processes (Cromby and Nightingale, 1999). This encourages researchers to take a critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge by attempting to understand the processes by which it comes to be seen as natural (Burr, 1995). Second, individuals' understandings of the world are seen as culturally and historically situated and changing across time and space (Young and Collin, 2004; Burr, 1995). Third, the construction of knowledge is seen as a negotiated process where certain interpretations are privileged, while others are eclipsed (Burr, 1995). Fourth knowledge and social action go together where particular versions of reality lead to particular forms of action (Burr, 1995). Fifth, individuals continuously construct the social world through their actions, which then becomes the reality to which they must respond (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). In other words individuals and society are in a continuous dialectical process of influencing each another, where social action impacts on society and thereby maintains and/or transforms existing social arrangements that people confront.

'Career' from a social constructionist point of view, has been defined as constituted by the actor in interaction with others as she/he moves through time and space (Cohen *et al*., 2004). We see two key implications of taking a social constructionist view to career research. First, social constructionism contextualizes career (Young and Collin, 2004) by highlighting how individuals and their societies are deeply influenced by one another and continuously and iteratively interact. This perspective therefore considers careers in relation to the various social contexts within which they are embedded such as organizational, familial and wider socio cultural contexts. It helps scholars to understand how individuals' careers are both enabled and constrained by their contexts, and how people's career thinking and enactment is shaped by these contexts. Second social constructionism has the potential to illuminate how individuals contribute towards

maintaining and/or redefining the contexts within which they operate through their career enactment.

We used social constructionism to examine the following questions in this paper:

1.   What are the modes of engagement highly skilled women in Sri Lanka use to develop their careers within organizational contexts?

2.   What are the implications of these modes of engagement for both women's careers and for the organizational contexts they are situated within?

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 their late career (ages 46-60) (see O'Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). We used women from early, mid and late career for our sample because scholars argue that women's preoccupations differ according to their career stage (see Maneiro and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil and Billimoria, 2005). Twelve respondents were working for private sector organizations in Sri Lanka while twelve were working for the public sector. We decided to include equal numbers of respondents from private and public organizations because of the contrasting pay structures and organizational cultures between public and private organizations in Sri Lanka. Private organizations in Sri Lanka are considered to pay high salaries and possess western-influenced organizational cultures where superiors are addressed by first names, work-life policies are widely available and career paths are based on individual performance. 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 for a variety of occupational sectors which included medicine, finance, banking, sales and marketing, education and engineering. More information about respondents, their designations and organizations are available in table 1 attached below.

All of the respondents were qualified to graduate level or above. Twenty women were married and had children. The four unmarried women in the sample were in their early careers. All respondents were identified through a snowballing sampling method (see Noy,

2008). In two to three hour interviews the respondents told their career stories in their own words. The interviews were not tape recorded because respondents did not wish to have their voices on computer files. Rather we took notes of respondents' narratives using shorthand. This was indeed an incredibly challenging process which was practically achieved by pausing after each question to record the verbatim. Notably, this did extend the length of an interview to over three hours in most cases. However, the interviewees were extremely cooperative. The development of full transcripts out of the notes taken began as soon as each interview came to an end. And in each case the full transcript was presented to the interviewee to make sure that everything she said had been correctly captured.

The data coalesced around four main themes: gender, work organizations, home and family and wider contextual structures in Sri Lanka. This paper focuses on the data on work organizations. The themes were identified during the data collection itself since data collection and analysis were undertaken in parallel (see Silverman, 2009). The main technique used to analyze the data was template analysis (see King, 2004). We first developed a list of codes (or template) representing the key themes. The initial key themes were identified in relation to the literature reviewed, the first researcher's personal experience with the Sri Lankan context, and the frequency that themes were raised by interviewees. However we also carefully examined all notes which were not associated with a theme (Ryan, 1999), and purposefully looked out for contrasting and minority views in our notes to ensure that our analysis was based on all respondents' voices rather than just the dominant majority. In this way we complied with the social constructionist approach that guided our research study (see Burr, 2003).

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 and to establish frequencies pertaining to themes. 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 together as we continued to analyze the data. We read and re-read the contents of each theme and wrote the contents into a story while retaining the original quotations based on

the notes taken during the interview. In other words we produced a 'coherent story' of each data theme (see King, 2004) which continued to develop our understanding of the themes. Here we focused on the relationships and associations between themes rather than analyzing the individual themes alone. We gauged the overriding patterns and relationships between the data themes by reading the data ourselves and trying to understand the 'big picture'.

The Sri Lankan context

Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country with a population of about 20 million people. Researchers agree that Sri Lanka is a patriarchal society (Lynch, 1999) characterized by extended family relations (Niles, 1998), intergenerational caring obligations (Malhotra and Mather, 1997) and social divisions between people. However despite the deeply patriarchal characteristics of Sri Lankan society, scholars argue that the socio-cultural position of Sri Lankan women is favourable when compared to women of other South Asian countries (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997). According to Malhotra and Tsui 'in contrast to much of the rest of South Asia, Sri Lanka has a cultural heritage of relative gender equality in terms of later marriages, bilateral descent, daughter's value in the parental home, continued kin support following marriage and widespread access to education for women' (1999; 221).

There is indeed widespread acceptance of education and employment for women in the country (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997) where 90% of women in Sri Lanka have been identified as literate in the year 2009 Labor force survey, and women comprise 63.2% of the total professionals in the country (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). Here, the year 2009 annual labor force survey defines professionals to include teachers, nurses etc. However, women in Sri Lanka account for only 20% of all senior officials and managers (Department of Census and Statistics, 2009). On the basis of this statistic we argue that there are barriers to women's advancement in Sri Lankan organizations since there do not appear to be a shortage in Sri Lankan women's skill sets. However to our knowledge there are no empirical studies which have explored these issues. Indeed there is only extremely little literature on women in the Sri Lankan context. Thus through our study of highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka we aim to contribute new insights to this under-researched group and setting.

Findings

In this section we illustrate how the women in our sample navigated their organizational contexts via eight modes of engagement in order to achieve hierarchical advancement which all interviewees identified as their career goal. We draw on verbatim quotes, based on notes taken during the interviews. In order to maintain confidentiality respondents' names have been changed.

Given our interest in how Sri Lankan women accounted for their careers, it is important at the outset to consider how they made sense of their career development. It was indeed striking that all our respondents aspired to reach the highest possible level in their organizational hierarchies. The following quotes vividly illustrate these goals and their ubiquity across the sample:

> *I should be a General Manager at a 5 star hotel – all my hard work over the years should end up in being a GM by reaching the highest level in the ranks* (Kalpana, 37)

> *Up to this point I wanted to be a director – but now that I am a director I feel that I could do more* (Rupika, 54)

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

> *I would want to be a finance director in a well-known company in Sri Lanka in another 4 years* (Nishanya, 36)

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

> *I would have to be a professor* (Sashi, 32)

> *There is a lot more to happen for me to be proud of my career, ideally I would like to be a paediatrician* (Gayathri, 29)

> *I would be a program director at MTV: a top corporate* (Natasha, 25)

The women in our sample were highly ambitious in terms of traditional objective factors and understood career success as hierarchical advancement (Arthur *et al.*, 2005). However, they worked in deeply gendered organizations, structured around the interests, lifestyles

and social norms of their male colleagues. This posed a considerable challenge for these women. In their accounts respondents talked about how they sought to overcome these barriers, using eight modes of engagement (adapting, compromising, manipulating, deceiving, explaining, networking, resisting and opting out) within organizational contexts, in order to progress upwards in their careers. In the following sections we discuss each of the modes of engagement in turn.

<u>Adapting</u>

Adapting refers to making significant adjustments to one's life, accommodating to new environments and/or reconciling to changes in prevailing circumstances (see Crompton, 2001; Cabrera, 2007). Early and mid-career women from particularly the public sector talked about how they adapted to work norms of respect and compliance to superiors in order to win their favour:

> *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)

Natasha's excerpt highlights that she has adapted to her organization's culture of compliance to superiors, since she perceived keeping superiors happy as important to her career advancement.

Seven women from the private sector spoke about how they adapted to heavy workloads and long working hours, since they did not want to challenge the 'ideal worker' norm (see Gambles *et al.* 2006) by complaining about these burdens to the management. Nishanya who works as a Finance manager for a leading garment manufacturing firm explains:

> *On my first day I discovered that the administration responsibilities also came under the finance manager for a couple of months! They said it is just for a few months but I have been doing it for 3 years. I used to get very annoyed when people complained to me that there wasn't toilet paper in the bathrooms and tell me to do something*

*about it – I am the finance manager for gods' sake! …. You just can't complain about the workload to the management without looking incompetent (*Nishanya, 36)

Nishanya adapted to additional administration duties which were out of her official job spec because she did not want to want to appear as incompetent and/or uncommitted to work and thereby risk her career prospects (see Lyng, 2010).

<u>Compromising</u>

Compromising refers to giving up one or more things to gain another (see Crompton, 2001), making concessions to arrive at a settlement and/or conceding something that the other side finds acceptable. In Sri Lanka's emerging private sector attending regular after-hours events at work was mandatory. Shanili who works for a leading financial services outsourcing firm explains:

> *The management encourages everybody to attend these matches* (cricket matches the company played against other companies) *to build citizenship but they play a match almost every weekend!* (Shanili, 36)

The majority of private sector respondents in our sample found it very difficult to attend these events due to their personal obligations to children, spouses and extended family members. Given the choice they would not attend. However respondents realized that their absence would certainly be frowned upon by bosses, and therefore made continual compromises targeting important events and avoiding others. Roshini talks about how she typically attends only events which her husband can accompany her to and subtly avoids others:

> *I try to go with him* (her husband) *as much as possible. I try to avoid events which he cannot attend* (Roshini, 28)

Four other respondents also talked about how they compromised in the same way by attending after-hours social events at work selectively. However, given that bosses and managers in private organizations expected all employees to participate in these social events, attending social events at work selectively involved breaking norms of compliance to superiors which respondents perceived to be vital for their career advancement in

organizations. Respondents were indeed acutely aware of the cost of this mode of engagement. However, they chose to compromise even while 'paying the price' of slower career growth.

<u>Manipulating</u>

Manipulating refers to indirectly influencing opinions and/or managing skilfully for one's personal gain by means such as ingratiation. A number of respondents from both sectors talked about how they attempted to ingratiate themselves with superiors, giving compliments and doing favours for them (Appelbaum and Hughes, 1998) in pursuit of improving their positions within their formal career paths and thereby progressing in their careers. Terms like 'buttering up', 'sucking up' and 'sticking up' were used by respondents to describe this behavior. Sherangi who works for a leading mobile telecommunications company explains:

> *At every level people are constantly sucking up to their bosses, hoping to get good ratings in the performance appraisals* (Sherangi, 26)

Similarly Shamila notes:

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

For private sector respondents, such ingratiation was seen as an important way to secure favourable ratings from bosses in performance evaluations and thereby progress upwards the performance based career paths in their organizations. For respondents from the public sector, ingratiation was a way to circumvent the time served based career structures in their organizations and progress in their careers soon.

<u>Deceiving</u>

Deceiving involves giving invalid information and/or misleading others by projecting a false impression, often causing a person to believe something that is not true, in order to gain some personal advantage. Three private sector respondents talked about how they deceived bosses by discreetly leaving halfway through long T & D programs in their

organizations, since they found it difficult to attend these programs alongside their personal obligations. Nishanya explains:

> *I don't decline every program - I go for the short ones, come off during half of the program when the program is long* (Nishanya, 36)

Three women explained how they deceived bosses by calling in sick occasionally in order to avoid after-hours social events at work:

> *I occasionally say that I am not feeling well. Sickness is a good excuse. But you have to be careful not to do it too often and make them wonder why you get sick on every other weekend* (Sherangi, 26)

In this insightful excerpt Sherangi highlights how she selectively uses ill-health as an excuse to avoid organisational events, so that she wouldn't attract the organisation's attention to her indiscretion. While simply not attending social events at work was not justifiable, staying away for reasons of ill-health was acceptable for especially women, as long as it did not happen too often.

Explaining

Explaining is making an idea or situation understandable to someone by describing it in depth and detail and/or justifying an event or action by reason which is seen as acceptable. Kishani talked about how she explains to her boss that she could not attend every social event at her workplace since she had a young child at home:

> *Sometimes I say that I have to go home to Hirun* (her son) *– I don't get a lot of time to spend with him after all and he is very small ......* (Kishani, 31)

In Kishani's view, young children was not only a legitimate explanation for women to avoid after-hours social events at work, but also leave halfway through official work meetings:

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

This excerpt highlights that family is a justifiable explanation for only women in Sri Lankan organizations.

Networking

Networking involves making contacts, building relationships and exchanging information with other people in order to expand and/or improve one's career opportunities (Brass *et al.* 2004). Dilhari who works for a premier state owned financial institution talked about how she actively networked with her superiors in order to enhance her position within the organization's formal career path:

> *I spent a lot of effort in trying to get close to the Director of our department. 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)

Dilhari's excerpt highlights how she developed social relationships in pursuit of getting on careerwise. Indeed in this sense, networking appears to be a political behavior in the Sri Lankan context. Individuals interacted socially to achieve a specific purpose.

Almost all respondents talked about how they networked extensively to secure the few good senior job opportunities in the Sri Lankan labor market. Kanthi explains:

> *I am taking effort to network now since I will be retiring and looking for private consultancy work. I exchange business cards and let people know about the consultancy work I have done. At senior level it is a bit downgrading to let people know you are looking for work. The ideal scenario would be if they come to you with offers. But it doesn't work like this in the real world – it is very competitive after all* (Kanthi, 52)

Kanthi's excerpt not only reveals that Sri Lankan women actively compete for the few good job opportunities in the labor market, but also highlights that career development continues after retirement. Other women similarly emphazised how they actively competed for jobs through networking since there were only few good senior jobs in the Sri Lankan labor

market and these jobs were often publicised through word of mouth and awarded on a first come first served basis. Kalpana explains:

One of my husband's colleagues is the Marketing Director at Cinnamon, she was telling me about a job their F & B manager had got in Fiji – this was a casual conversation we had during a dinner party. 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. Incidentally the director knew my husband quite well and they decided not to advertise the post (Kalpana, 37)

In this 'first come, first served situation', networking was part of the game. One needed to get to the job first in order to secure it.

Resisting

Resisting is exerting force in opposition (see Watts, 2010), defending oneself and/or others from harmful forces and/or refusing to comply with prevailing rules. One respondent, who worked as a psychologist for a leading mobile telecommunications firm in Sri Lanka talked about how she resisted norms of compliance to superiors in her organization:

My boss and I had issues with regard to counselling services. He expected me to share my clients inside stories with him – I was appalled and told him off on several occasions. Only later did I realize that this sort of thing didn't happen in Sri Lankan organizations. Telling off your boss was uncommon and I guess being told off by a woman 15 years your junior would have been unbearable to him (Shamila, 32)

Shamila was eventually compelled to leave her organization since her boss made trouble for her for hurting his ego. Thus her resistance effort does not appear to be successful in changing the organization's norms.

Opting out

Opting out involves making a decision to withdraw and leave, possibly because one cannot deal with contextual barriers (see Al-Ariss, 2010). One respondent spoke about how she

chose to opt-out from her organization, because her colleagues harassed her for breaking the norm of being seen within the organization (Gambles *et al.* 2006):

> *Anju* (her daughter) *got her heart problem so I had to take days off here and there. I contributed as much as could – you don't necessarily need to be at the department to work. But in my absence they* (her colleagues) *were finding fault with things that I had done. All of us were involved in a research project. So in my absence they could easily exaggerate faults in my work and highlight my lack of contribution. Most of my colleagues cool and silent and the HOD didn't even look me in the eye – I was side-lined in all the new projects going on – and there were two conferences for which all the lecturers except me were sponsored to attend. I couldn't work in such an environment – I developed insomnia – I left* (Sashi, 32)

Sashi elected to make her daughter her priority by opting out of the gendered organizational system which did not make sufficient allowances for women's roles out of the workplace, even in extraordinary circumstances.

Discussion

In this paper we have examined how a group of highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka actively engage with their organizational contexts in order to progress in their careers. Based on the findings of our study we make two significant contributions to existing literature. First we illustrate how the women in our sample drew on one or more of eight modes of engagement, to advance their careers within largely gendered organizations characterised by heavy workloads, norms of being seen within the organization, and after-hours activities (in the case of private organizations): all which place a great deal of value on aspects of men's lifestyles such as freedom from familial responsibilities (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010). Women from both sectors adapted to heavy workloads (Lyng, 2010) and norms of compliance to superiors, networked (Forrest and Dougherty, 2001) and ingratiated themselves with superiors to improve their career prospects: all in pursuit of advancing their careers. Private sector respondents compromised by attending after-hours work events selectively and deceived bosses by leaving halfway through T & D programs discreetly in order to comply with their bosses' expectations and win their favour. This typology of strategies that women in Sri Lanka use to advance their careers within organizational

contexts develops Duberley et al.'s (2006), Richardson's (2009), Al-Ariss (2010) and Evetts (2000) work by extending the modes of engagement framework to individuals from a less economically developed non-western context.

Significantly, although strategies such as adapting to heavy workloads (Lyng, 2010) and networking to improve one's career prospects (Forrest and Doherty, 2001) are reminiscent of the gender and management literature, the absolute centrality of adhering to norms of compliance to superiors and ingratiating oneself with superiors to advance careers within organizations are certainly new insights into existing understandings of women's careers. However, we acknowledge that men in the Sri Lankan context may also use ingratiation and compliance to superiors to advance their careers within organizations since these features appear to be central elements of organizational cultures in Sri Lanka applicable to both men and women. In fact, it is highly likely that norms of compliance to superiors in Sri Lankan organizations is an extension of wider contextual norms of respect to elders within Sri Lankan society (see Perera, 1991). However, we would argue that strategies of compromising, deceiving and drawing on gendered explanations to avoid after-hours work commitments are exclusive to women since they have significant domestic roles to manage alongside work obligations (see Crompton *et al.,* 2005). Significantly studies suggest informal workplace socialising to be very important for individuals' career advancement (see Sommerlad, 2002) since decisions about top management positions are less structured and often based on subjective criteria (see Burke and Vinnicombe, 2006; Powell, 1999). In the light of these findings we would argue that women who exclude themselves from informal social activities at work are likely to lose on the social capital important for their career advancement (see Bolton and Muzio, 2007).

Interestingly, not a single respondent in our sample attempted to change prevailing organizational cultures which they experienced as constraining to their careers. This is indeed in contrast to Duberley *et al*.'s (2006) and Richardson's (2009) findings which highlight a number of instances where individuals worked towards transforming prevailing social structures. In our study, only one woman drew on the mode of resistance, when she confronted her boss on an ethical issue at work. And significantly, this respondent was raised in New Zealand as opposed to other women who had lived in Sri Lanka all their lives. Studies have noted that Sri Lankan's are less likely to attempt to transform prevailing

circumstances in comparison to individuals in economically developed western countries (see Niles, 1998) and our findings seems to confirm this view.

Overall our analysis which highlights the very specific things Sri Lankan women did to advance their careers within organizational contexts develops existing work on individual career actors' modes of engagement (Duberley *et al*. 2006; Richardson, 2009; Al-Ariss, 2010). In particular, our typology extends Evetts (2000) work which reveals five strategies women use in their careers. While we note that Evetts' (2000) arguments were not based on empirical research work, our data confirms the strategies of manipulation, adaptation and resistance Evetts (2000) has highlighted. However the term negotiation in Evetts (2000) framework seemed to encompass many different types of career strategies such as compromising and manipulating, and we found it difficult to distinguish between resistance and confrontation as Evetts (2000) had done.

Second, based on the above empirical findings, we present conjectures regarding the implications of the modes of engagement respondents used to advance their careers: for both women's careers and for the organizational contexts in which they are situated. As mentioned before, the majority of women in this sample were subtly working around the organizational structures they perceived to impact on their careers by means such as compromising and deceiving. Based on the evidence generated in this study, however, we suggest that such actions do not do anything to challenge the elements women perceived to constrain them. For instance, respondents discreetly leaving halfway through T & D programs and calling in sick to avoid after-hours social events at work leaves both this cultural expectation, and the existing structure of the work day untouched. While such strategies enabled women to move around these obstacles, it does nothing to fundamentally challenge the obstacle itself. Moreover women adapted their personal lives to fulfil the demands of organizations and thereby progress in their careers (see Crompton, 2001), contributed towards maintaining gendered elements of organizations such as long work hours (see Lyng, 2010) which constrains women's career development (see Bolton and Muzio, 2007). Thus women who find it difficult to devote additional hours to work because of domestic commitments will continue to face challenges in developing their careers within organizational contexts. The point we are trying to make is that by deploying these strategies, some women may be able to advance in their organizations. However, their

effect is to maintain the existing, gendered, organizational order (Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Bolton and Muzio, 2007). After all, people are parts of their environments and through their actions they contribute to the social structures which impact on them (Weick, 1995).

Women contributing towards maintaining gendered elements of organizations, as they enact their careers within them echoes existing understandings (see Lyng, 2010; Irvine and Vermilya, 2010). However scholars also note that gendered organizational cultures are increasingly challenged by women who stand up to those who resist their authority and challenge the existing status quo in organizations (see Watts, 2010), women who demonstrate that motherhood and work can be achieved together (see Lewis, 2010) and most importantly women who infiltrate leadership and management positions and bring new ways of doing things (see Helgensen, 1990; Bass and Avolio, 1994; Jogulu and Wood, 2006). Although these examples seem to suggest that women would be able to change extant social order through resistance, it is important to note that the one woman in this study who resisted prevailing organizational cultures was not able to do so. In fact this respondent was compelled to leave her organization. In the light of these findings, we would argue that women's success in transforming the existing social order in organizations depends on the strength of extant norms of prejudice in the context. In the case of Sri Lanka, there appears to be a really powerful and normative dimension in this context, particularly in relation to norms of respect to superiors which are backed by wider cultural ideologies of respect to elders (Perera, 1991) and prevailing Buddhist teachings (Nyanatiloka, 2000). However, it is important to note that in-roads towards change may be made when cracks start to appear in normative dimensions. In fact, the emerging modern western style private organizations in Sri Lanka which encourage employees to address superiors on a first name basis may just be one of these cracks that slowly pave the way towards change.

Implications for practice, areas for further research and limitations

We see this analysis as having two significant implications for practice. First these findings could raise organization policy-makers' awareness of how women's careers are constrained by gendered organizational cultures in Sri Lanka, and how gendered elements of

organizations are sustained and maintained as women enact their careers within work contexts. This is important because employers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere could understand how women employees are disadvantaged in organizations and take measures towards enabling this valuable workforce develop their careers within work contexts. Second, women workers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere could use our findings to reflect on how their actions contribute towards maintaining the gendered organizational cultures which constrain them and consider the implications of their modes of engagement both for themselves and for other women in their organizations.

While we feel that our findings of how Sri Lankan women develop their careers within organizational contexts via different modes of engagement make a significant contribution to extant understandings of women's careers, we call upon scholars to test and develop our framework further. Insight into further career strategies and social outcomes than those highlighted in our study could be revealed by testing this framework across women in other socio cultural contexts. It will be particularly interesting to explore whether women from more economically developed countries use similar strategies to develop their careers within organizational contexts. Moreover, it is also important to investigate whether men in Sri Lanka use similar strategies to advance their careers within organizations. Particularly, it will be extremely interesting to find out what might be justifiable and socially accepted explanations for men who want time off work.

Although we emphasize the implications of our study for managers and suggest ways that scholars can develop our findings further, we also recognize the limitations of this research. Significantly our research sample comprised of only 24 women, and therefore does not represent the entire Sri Lankan population. Having said that, the purpose of this paper was not to generalize findings across the Sri Lankan context but rather to give insight into how exactly women enact their careers in relation to their organizational contexts.

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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)