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## Ideal girls for Christian internationalism: the YWCA in early twentieth-century South Asia

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in constructing the terms of political engagement for young Christian women in South Asia. It focuses on a periodical called *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, published between 1908 and 1916, which typically carried didactic essays and short aphoristic pieces of writing by Western educators and social workers, addressing a predominantly South Asian readership. Through this magazine, as well as through its Bible-study groups, social events, sporting gatherings and social work activities, the YWCA sought both to create opportunities for women's participation in public life in South Asia and to articulate the boundaries of proper Christian womanhood in this practice. In particular, I argue that the writing in this magazine emphasised ideals of enterprise, positivity and professionalism. The article also examines the effects of this discourse, considering how South Asian Christian women inhabited an ethic of religious womanhood and showing that they engaged in a balancing act that both reiterated and contested the missionary ideal of 'good' womanhood.

### KEYWORDS

YWCA; internationalism; youth; South Asia; gender

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a burgeoning print culture and projects of education intervened in the lives of women – particularly young women – all over the world, seeking to fashion them into properly modern political subjects. In South Asia's colonial context, this phenomenon was complicated by the competing claims that liberal imperialism and emergent nationalist cultures made on the figure of the 'new woman'.<sup>1</sup> Feminist historians increasingly draw attention to the centrality of internationalist thinking to such projects of political

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<sup>1</sup>T. Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, religion, and cultural nationalism* (London, 2001); S. Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The production of desirable subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Berkeley, CA, 2018); M. Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The conjugal family ideal in colonial India* (Bloomington, IN, 2008). M. de Alwis, 'Housewives of the nation: the cultural signification of the Sri Lankan nation' in I. Lenz, H. Lutz, M. Morokvasic, C. Schöning-Kalender and H. Schwenken (eds), *Crossing Borders and Shifting Boundaries, Vol. II: Gender, identities and networks* (Wiesbaden, 2002).

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subject-making.<sup>2</sup> This work shows that associational communities such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the Student Christian Movement (SCM) – all of which played prominent roles in the civilising enterprise of British colonialism in South Asia – were central to the 'imperial social formation' that undergirded the emergence of both British and colonial feminisms.<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on the YWCA's role in articulating an ideal for young women's political agency in early twentieth century South Asia. The YWCA had been established in 1855 in Britain, initially to house nurses who were travelling to or returning from the Crimean War. Its main purpose was the provision of boarding houses, and a spiritually and intellectually enriching community, for single working women.<sup>4</sup> In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the YWCA became a global movement, with hostels across the British colonial world. In South Asia, the first YWCA hostel was established in erstwhile Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1875.<sup>5</sup> By 1900, branches had been established in Calcutta (now Kolkata), Madras (now Chennai), Lahore, Kandy, Colombo and other cities.<sup>6</sup> An account of the YWCA's early years in the region, written by two British missionaries, notes that the organisation served three communities of young women: Anglo-Indians and Eurasians,<sup>7</sup> educated South Asian Christians, and young missionaries and social workers from the West.<sup>8</sup> In addition to boarding and lodging, the YWCA also provided a range of opportunities for the building of an international community through social events. These included sewing and tea parties, Bible reading groups, talks on social issues, and lessons in sports such as tennis.<sup>9</sup>

By focusing on the YWCA, this article draws attention to the understudied context of South Asian Christian girlhood and young womanhood. Much of the scholarship on gender and colonial modernity in South Asia has concentrated on Hindu and Muslim reformism in the late colonial years.<sup>10</sup> Within

<sup>2</sup>A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); M. Sinha, *Spectres of Mother India: The global restructuring of an empire* (Durham, NC, 2006); K. Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western women and South Asia during British rule* (London, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>M. Sinha, 'Mapping the imperial social formation: a modest proposal for feminist history', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 25, 4 (2000), 1077–82. See also Burton, *op. cit.*, 171–206.

<sup>4</sup>A. Izzo, *Liberal Christianity and Women's Global Activism: The YWCA of the USA and the Maryknoll Sisters* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2018); N.M. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906–46* (Urbana-Champaign, IL, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>E. Wilson and S. Stevenson, *Fifty Years of the Young Women of India, Burma and Ceylon* (Calcutta 1925); YWCA, *Association Life the World Around* (New York, 1914), 1–2.

<sup>6</sup>Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 4–9.

<sup>7</sup>Here, 'Anglo-Indian' refers to British persons domiciled in India, and Eurasians to those of mixed-race parentage. By the mid-twentieth century, however, Anglo-Indian had come to also refer to mixed-race persons. On this, see A. Blunt, *Domicile and Diaspora: Anglo-Indian women and the spatial politics of home* (Oxford, 2008), and T. Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820–1932* (Manchester, 2016), 71–90.

<sup>8</sup>Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 5–9; YWCA, *op. cit.*, 14–19.

<sup>10</sup>Sarkar, *op. cit.*; Khoja-Moolji, *op. cit.*

this field, a small, recent scholarship discusses the experiences of girls and young women, stressing the significance of girlhood – a period of adolescent maturing beyond puberty – to modern subjectivities.<sup>11</sup> This work also emphasises the centrality of print culture, in both English and regional languages, to the cultivation of modern dispositions, and articulations of young people's political agency.<sup>12</sup> In this article, I demonstrate that attention to Christian girlhood indicates that practices of gendered subject-making in late colonial South Asia were tethered not only to the geography of the emergent post-colonial nation states in the region but also to a Christian internationalist vision of women's political work. Christian internationalism allowed young South Asian women to envision their public roles, in a rapidly changing social and geopolitical landscape, as being oriented towards not merely nation-building – as the scholarship on Hindu and Muslim reformism has emphasised – but the construction of networks of international exchange within a Christian humanitarian paradigm.

This article argues that the imaginary of the YWCA woman was both enabling and limiting. On the one hand, the YWCA played a central role in creating opportunities for professionalisation – as social workers and teachers – for South Asian women. It also enabled the growing group of young South Asian women who worked outside the home to access an international social community through its tea parties and sporting events. Additionally, life in the YWCA hostels fostered an international community of women at the heart of many South Asian cities: enabling young Christian women from the region to feel connected to a transnational imaginary of women's public life. On the other hand, the YWCA's activities enacted in South Asia – as in Europe and North America – a middle-class ideal of appropriate womanhood that did not depart from a Christian vision of women's essential role as located in the home. For instance, as I elaborate below, women's professional work was located squarely within a discourse about women's essential suitability to care-work. Further, the YWCA's hostels and publications sought to cultivate respectable, middle-class womanhood through an emphasis on scriptural role models, as well as on personal development over confrontational or collective politics on the basis of class and race. The principal source for this article – namely the YWCA periodical *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* – does not represent the critical voices of South Asian women themselves, but other publications from a slightly later period in the early twentieth century tell us how young Christians from the region inhabited the ethic of Christian selfhood that

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<sup>11</sup>A. Tambe, *Defining Girlhood in India: A transnational history of sexual maturity laws* (Urbana-Champaign, IL, 2019); R. Lal, *Coming of Age in Nineteenth Century India: The girl-child and the art of playfulness* (Cambridge, 2013); S. Nijhawan, *Women and Girls in the Hindi Public Sphere: Periodical literature in colonial North India* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>12</sup>See especially Nijhawan, *op. cit.*

organisations such as the YWCA articulated.<sup>13</sup> Even as they did not challenge the demands of ‘respectable’ femininity, I argue that South Asian Christian women drew on the discourse of friendship within internationalist life to challenge the racist and civilisational imaginary that missionaries cultivated.

In the sections that follow, I will initially highlight two debates that both hinge on the question of colonial girlhood: the first focuses on associational life and colonialism, and the second on print cultures. Following on from this, I elaborate on the three key themes that emerge from *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* as central to the ideal YWCA woman: enterprise, positivity and professionalism.

### Christians and internationalism in late colonial South Asia

In the early twentieth century, South Asia’s Protestant Christian community consisted mostly of those who had converted over the course of the nineteenth century, as a result of encounters with missionaries.<sup>14</sup> A rich historical scholarship has shown that Christian missionary work was most successful in Southern India, where communities of ‘native Christians’ had already been living for centuries before the intensification of Anglophone missionary work in the mid-nineteenth century. They were also most successful among the lowest castes – even though missionaries initially courted elites, and often reiterated casteist moral narratives that saw the uppermost castes as the most highly refined.<sup>15</sup> Conversions nevertheless generated significant social mobility – not only for individuals but for whole communities – facilitated both by the escape that conversion allowed from caste oppression and by education in missionary schools.<sup>16</sup> Eliza Kent traces the formerly untouchable Shanar community’s conversion, and re-positioning as a powerful landed caste group, the Nadars. Education in Christian schools, and in the English language, also opened doors for professional work in the colonial establishment, and in the growing numbers of schools and colleges around the region.<sup>17</sup> Further, embeddedness within internationalist communities brought South Asian Christians in touch not only with British missionaries but also with American social gospel preachers, social workers and teachers.

<sup>13</sup>J. Abraham, ‘The much-criticised Indian Christian’, *Student Movement Review*, 5, 4 (1923), 57–59; A Group in Delhi, ‘Students and public questions’, *Student Movement Review*, 5, 1 (1923), 13–15; ‘The quadriennial conference at Rangoon’, *The Sunflower*, 38 (1938), 20–22.

<sup>14</sup>G. Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, modernity, and belief* (Princeton, NJ, 1998); E.F. Kent, *Converting Women: Gender and Protestant Christianity in colonial South India* (Oxford, 2004); K. Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies: The rise of the colonial bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka* (Colombo, 2009).

<sup>15</sup>On caste and upward social mobility, see Kent, *op. cit.*, 51–80. On upper-caste converts, see the discussion on Pandita Ramabai in Viswanathan, *op. cit.*, 118–52.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, *op. cit.* 279–301.

<sup>17</sup>Kent, *op. cit.*, 51–80.

By dint of this history, the Christian community was closely embedded in international associational life and relied on these connections to consolidate its social position in a context where the nationalist bourgeoisie was overwhelmingly associated with Hindu, Muslim and (in Sri Lanka) Buddhist reformism. International associational life was particularly important to young Christians' political subjectivity because by the early twentieth century, social service had come to be seen as the most appropriate channel for the expression of youth political feeling across the British colonial world.<sup>18</sup> In Britain, the SCM was at the forefront of this phenomenon. It contributed to the work of the World Student Christian Federation which, following its creation in 1895, enabled youth from across the Anglophone colonial world to come together to discuss questions of social change.<sup>19</sup> By the early 1910s, as many as 38 SCM branches had reportedly been established in South Asia.<sup>20</sup> The SCM worked closely with the YMCA, the YWCA and missionary educational institutions in creating the conditions for the participation of young South Asian Christians in a new international world of youth political activism.<sup>21</sup>

This article approaches Christian youth internationalism through the prism of the periodical *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, which was disseminated to South Asian YWCA members between 1908 and 1916. In doing so, it deals with forms of Christianity associated with Protestant communities – and it is worth noting that, in the region, the term 'Christian', when used without qualification, tended to be applied to such communities.<sup>22</sup> By the early twentieth century, the YWCA had over 50 branches in the region. The exact scale of its membership is difficult to confirm as the organisation operated a loose membership structure, allowing for shifting circumstances that affected women's ability to commit to participation in its activities.<sup>23</sup> Histories of the YWCA's role in Western contexts emphasise its self-articulated 'preventative and constructive' role: staving off the temptations of moral urban life for working-class women through the provision of Christian living quarters, while also laying the foundations for progressive political change through social service.<sup>24</sup> This scholarship highlights that the moral authority that the YWCA assumed in this mandate iterated its working-class and non-white members as subjects in need of stewardship, rather than as equal partners.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly,

<sup>18</sup>G. Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and beyond, 1880–1980* (London, 2014), 40–44.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 36–40.

<sup>20</sup>World's Student Christian Federation, *Reports of Student Christian Movements* (London, 1919), 74–84.

<sup>21</sup>See, for instance, issues of the Student Christian Association of India, Burma and Ceylon, *Student Movement Review* (1919–1925).

<sup>22</sup>On the more marginal role of Catholic institutions and organisations within British colonial India, see Allender, *op. cit.*, 271–96.

<sup>23</sup>Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 10–26.

<sup>24</sup>Izzo, *op. cit.*, 21–22.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*; Robertson, *op. cit.*

then, the YMCA and YWCA material from South Asia posits an ever greater need for a preventative role in the region, where immorality and temptation were thought to abound.<sup>26</sup> Addressing the members of its branches from within this context, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* typically carried articles by Western writers that instructed young South Asian women on appropriate conduct in public life. While it is difficult to establish the exact numbers of articles written by white rather than South Asian Christian women, the names and stated perspectives of authors suggest that they were typically Western.

When *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* ceased publication in 1916, it was because of criticisms of the magazine's form.<sup>27</sup> The YWCA of India, Burma and Ceylon eventually published a new magazine called *Women's Outlook*, also focused on youth, which featured young South Asian women's own voices and experiences to a greater extent. This emergent change is evident in the pages of *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, which published registers of the YWCA main and student branches, demonstrating a clear generational shift: many of the student presidents are evidently South Asian. This trajectory was far from unusual for this moment: the 1910s and 1920s saw a dramatic change in the leadership of Christian associational life in South Asia, as 'native Christian' communities – as they called themselves – asserted themselves with the SCM, the YMCA and YWCA, in educational institutions, and even in the Anglican Church.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, they would do as working-class and Black communities in Europe and North America had done within Christian associational life and draw on social gospel to advance a progressive political agenda. In South Asia, this took the form of advancing anticolonial thinking within the community, even as Christians in India and Sri Lanka remained concerned about their minoritised position within their respective emergent nation states.

Other student Christian publications from the early twentieth century mark the beginnings of this political current that would result ultimately in the schism that formed the Church of South India in the 1940s, after many years of Tamil Christian critique of missionary theology. As such, publications of the SCM, and of colleges like the Madras Christian College and Women's Christian College, all became sites at which young South Asians debated their position relative to an international Christian community in an imperial world, and within an emergent Indian nation state that was paradigmatically upper caste and Hindu.

<sup>26</sup>E.C. Carter, *The Young Men of India and Ceylon* (New York, 1908); Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup>The Editors, 'The young women of India and Ceylon', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 18, 6 (1916), 118.

<sup>28</sup>C. Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863–1937: Contending with marginality* (London, 2004).



Gendered difference is, however, also materialised through these publications in that the Women's Christian College's *Sunflower* magazine was much less overtly political than the *Madras Christian College Magazine*, which was published in the same city and openly commented on civil disobedience and, supportively, on striking students. Much as in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, the essays in *The Sunflower*, almost all written by South Asian women, emphasise the inward-looking cultivation of Christian respectability instead. This is not to say that they had no critique of missionary discourses about gender. On the contrary, these women were engaged in an ongoing dialogue that contested their positioning as racialised subjects of rescue, even as they asserted their own place within an international humanitarian imaginary of respectable Christian womanhood that in turn allowed them to distinguish themselves as doers, rather than recipients of Christian social service.<sup>29</sup>

The focus on *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* in this article thus shows how the YWCA – a prominent institution that most educated women in South Asia, Christian or otherwise, would have interacted with at some point – articulated an influential ideal of the socially upwardly mobile, professional, and yet feminine and domestically skilful middle-class woman.

### **Girlhood, associational life and colonialism**

By the early years of the twentieth century, 'girlhood' had become, in the English-speaking imperial world, metonymic of modernity itself. As much as the romping, playful – and implicitly white – child had come to symbolise a fantasy of innocence and ordinary life in the nineteenth century,<sup>30</sup> 'girlhood' indexed new possibilities for transnational connection, inter-racial intimacy and a growing international agenda of women's rights.<sup>31</sup> While scholarship on the 'modern girl' has tended to focus overwhelmingly on cultures of consumption, practices of humanitarian association, which drew young people into newly professionalised careers in social work and nursing, were at the heart of the global discourse on girlhood by the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>32</sup> The experience of encounters, and girlish friendship with classed and racial 'others', undergirded life within the wide variety of humanitarian communities that emerged at this time, including settlement

<sup>29</sup>C.A. Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of service, association, and citizenship* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>30</sup>K. Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The child's part in nineteenth-century American culture* (Chicago, IL, 2005); R. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights* (New York, 2011); J. Rose, *The case of Peter Pan, or the impossibility of children's fiction* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993).

<sup>31</sup>S.L. Lewis, 'Cosmopolitanism and the modern girl: a cross-cultural discourse in 1930s Penang', *Modern Asian Studies*, 4, 6 (2008), 1385–419; P.C. Ramamurthy, 'The modern girl in India in the interwar years: interracial intimacies, international competition, and historical eclipsing', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 34, 1–2 (2006), 197–226.

<sup>32</sup>Tambe, *op. cit.*, A.A. George, *Making Modern Girls: A history of girlhood, labour, and social development in colonial Lagos* (Athens, OH, 2014).



houses, missionary societies and organisations such as the Red Cross and the YWCA.<sup>33</sup>

A growing historiography highlights the liberal imperial investments that drove international associational life in this period.<sup>34</sup> For instance, even as it espoused a universal language of womanhood, purporting to engage all Christian women across barriers of race and class, in practice the YWCA was riven with problems of race and class.<sup>35</sup> In North America, the organisation was racially segregated until 1946. The mainstream Settlement Movement, which was most prominent in the US, similarly largely neglected Black communities.<sup>36</sup> In their iteration in the erstwhile colonies – as hostels, compounds and boarding houses for girls – Settlement Houses enacted an explicitly racialised politics of difference: iterating young Asian, African and Indigenous women as figures in need of discipline and reform.<sup>37</sup>

This mode, in which women's international associations differently engaged white and non-white girls, was complicated also by the place of race within discourses on childhood and youth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The metaphor of 'childhood' had long circulated within imperial discourse and cast non-white communities as races in their 'adolescence' – that is, lacking the adult capacity for political participation that might legitimately enable them to claim sovereignty from European colonial rule.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously, within medical and social work discourse by the early twentieth century, the availability of 'girlhood' as a period of emotional maturation beyond physical puberty had come to be held up as a yardstick of social progress.<sup>39</sup> This preoccupation with girlhood was also reflected in the geopolitical discourse of this time. In the League of Nations' debates on sex trafficking and social sanitation, 'girlhood' emerged at the intersection of a climate science-driven preoccupation with the influence of temperature on the age of puberty, and racial scientists' focus on establishing the biological basis of race difference.<sup>40</sup> Presaging the present

<sup>33</sup>S. Koven, 'The "sticky sediment" of daily life: radical domesticity, revolutionary Christianity, and the problem of wealth in Britain from the 1880s to the 1930s', *Representations*, 120, 1 (2012), 39–82; S. Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, historiography, Hull-House domesticity* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2001).

<sup>34</sup>H. Fischer-Tiné, 'Global civil society and the forces of empire: The Salvation Army, British imperialism, and the "prehistory" of NGOs (ca. 1880–1920)' in S. Conrad and D. Sachsenmaier (eds), *Competing Visions of World Order: Global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s* (New York, 2007).

<sup>35</sup>Robertson, *op. cit.*; J. Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945*. Reprint 2014 ed. (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

<sup>36</sup>E. Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbours: Race and the limits of reform in the American settlement house movement, 1890–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993).

<sup>37</sup>D. Gaitskell, '“Christian compounds for girls”: church hostels for African women in Johannesburg, 1907–1970', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 6, 1 (1979), 44–69; M. Demian, 'Making women in the city: notes from a Port Moresby boarding house', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 42, 2 (2017), 403–25; S. Krishnan, 'Anxious notes on college life: the gossip journals of Eleanor McDougall', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 27, 4 (2017), 575–89.

<sup>38</sup>E. Thornberry, 'The problem of African girlhood: raising the age of consent in the Cape of Good Hope, 1893–1905', *Law and History Review*, 38, 1 (2020), 219–40; S. Sen, *Colonial Childhoods: The juvenile periphery of India, 1850–1945* (London, 2005).

<sup>39</sup>Tambe, *op. cit.*, 17–34.

<sup>40</sup>*ibid.*

preoccupation in development discourse with ‘girlhood’ as a marker of social progress, the figure of the ‘girl’ became an index of civilisational hierarchy in the early twentieth century.

In India, a debate on the age of consent in the 1920s saw bourgeois nationalist communities asserting their modernity in demanding that the age be raised, and young women allowed a period of maturation beyond puberty and before marriage.<sup>41</sup> In the same period, the American journalist Katherine Mayo argued in her infamous book *Mother India* that colonial rule was essential to guarantee for Indian women a period of ‘girlhood’ before the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood.<sup>42</sup> Colonial educators who established hostels – boarding houses – to educate girls often made the case that such residential learning was necessary to ensure that their wards were not pressured into early marriage by their families, and also to enable them to cultivate a distinctly modern emotional disposition.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Indian social reformers also directed their efforts towards girls, often simultaneously resisting local caste patriarchies and racialised colonial discourse.<sup>44</sup>

The feminist historian Mrinalini Sinha has characterised this complex and uneven zone of encounter between British and South Asian feminists as an ‘imperial social formation’ – a site upon which both British and Indian feminisms emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>45</sup> The young South Asian women who attended missionary educational institutions, participated in YWCA activity and lived in hostels inhabited this zone of encounter in their everyday lives. Most of these women would have belonged to upwardly mobile families, many of them Christians, who had benefited from social connections with missionaries that enabled them to eke out a place for themselves within the colonial middle class.<sup>46</sup> As scholars such as Eliza Kent show, the upward social mobility that conversion afforded to new Christians within wider caste society hinged substantially on the adoption of ‘respectable’ practices by women in these communities. So, for instance, conversion was often accompanied by sartorial changes – accommodating a style that was presented simultaneously as more pious in its modesty, and more appropriately modern. In *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, this respectability is positioned not only as a matter of

<sup>41</sup>I. Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age: Child marriage in India, 1891–1937* (Cambridge, 2020).

<sup>42</sup>K. Mayo, *Mother India* (New York, 1927). For the context of this book and the controversy surrounding it, see Sinha, *Spectres*, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup>Krishnan, *op. cit.*; de Alwis, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup>M. Kosambi, ‘Multiple Contestations: Pandita Ramabai’s educational and missionary activities in late nineteenth-century India and abroad’, *Women’s History Review*, 7, 2 (1998), 193–208; B. Bagchi, ‘Towards ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the movement for women’s education in Bengal, c. 1900–c. 1932’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 45, 6 (2009), 743–55; S.A. Raman, *Getting Girls to School: Social reform in the Tamil districts 1870–1930* (Calcutta, 1996).

<sup>45</sup>Sinha, ‘Mapping the Imperial Social Formation’, *op. cit.*

<sup>46</sup>Kent, *op. cit.*, 51–80.

cultivating new habits of dress and home-keeping, but also a project of emotional self-discipline. As the contemporaneous writings of Indian Christian women like Krupabai Satthianadhan show us, this emotional discourse figured large in projects of self-making, and in an emergent imaginary of South Asian Christian girlhood.<sup>47</sup>

Even as a missionary discourse about gendered respectability found resonance within projects of social mobility and Christian conversion in South Asia, many young Christians still contested the subordinate roles into which they were placed by the international sphere of Christian life they inhabited through the YWCA, the SCM and their missionary educational institutions.<sup>48</sup> By the 1910s, Indian Christians had become vocal critics of missionary-driven evangelisation and sought to articulate a new theology that was uniquely regional.<sup>49</sup> Such dissent would also find its way into the everyday lives of young Christians. In the 1940s, the students at Women's Christian College called on their institution to disown its founding principal, Eleanor McDougall, and her proto-ethnographic text, *Lamps in the Wind*, which painted young Indian women as hapless figures in need of rescue.<sup>50</sup>

Simultaneously, Christians felt remote from the Hindu and Buddhist revivalisms that characterised nationalist life, in India and Sri Lanka respectively.<sup>51</sup> In this context, Christian communities in India drew on their embeddedness within internationalist associational life for political belonging.<sup>52</sup> Social gospel theology, which had gained popularity in the late nineteenth century within humanitarian communities, advocated for progressive social action, over evangelisation, as the core of Christian public life.<sup>53</sup> South Asian Christians distinguished their social gospel-driven work from the ethic of service that drove Gandhian nationalism, by anchoring it not to the geography of the nation-in-making but explicitly to an internationalist geography of Christian social and political activism. In doing so, they articulated critiques of nationalism as narrow and exclusivist.<sup>54</sup> This allowed them to carve out a sphere of political agency that was distinct from

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<sup>47</sup>K. Satthianadhan, *Saguna* (Bombay, 1895); K. Satthianadhan, *Kamala* (Bombay, 1894); K. Satthianadhan, *Miscellaneous Writings of Krupabai Satthianadhan* (Bombay, 1896).

<sup>48</sup>M. Allen and J. Haggis, 'True friends or false? The changing nature of relationships between Indian and British missionary women in the imperial contact zone of India, c. 1880–1940', *Outskirts*, 28 (2013), <https://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-28/margaret-allen-and-jane-haggis> (accessed 7 October 2019); Krishnan, *op. cit.*, 585–88.

<sup>49</sup>Mallampalli, *op. cit.*, 87–107.

<sup>50</sup>E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian college women and their problems* (London, 1940).

<sup>51</sup>Mallampalli, *op. cit.*; Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, *op. cit.*, 263–78.

<sup>52</sup>Mallampalli, *op. cit.* 98–107; Kent, *op. cit.*, 51–80.

<sup>53</sup>On social gospel globally see Izzo, *op. cit.* On Social Gospel and Indian Christian public life in the early twentieth century, see prominent YMCA and SCM activist Eddie Asirvatham's memoir, *The Evolution of My Social Thinking* (Bangalore, 1970).

<sup>54</sup>For examples, see 'Students and public questions', *Student Movement Review* (July 1923), 13–15; 'A brief statement about the World's Student Christian Federation', *Student Movement Review* (July 1923), 10–13; 'Notes of the month', *Madras Christian College Magazine* (1919), 302.

the discursive site of implicitly upper-caste mainstream nationalist life. The demands of gendered respectability, however, held firm, and as the final section of this paper shows, South Asian Christian women drew on their position as ‘proper’ Christian women to participate in projects both of inward-looking virtuous individualism and of social service that iterated working-class and lower-caste women as the ‘backward’ subjects in need of their help.

### Print cultures and modern girlhood

Print cultures were central to the articulation of gendered modernity across the Anglophone imperial world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholarship in this field has highlighted a global tendency for print culture in this period to address ideals of girlhood – through etiquette booklets and manuals – rather than the lived experience of girls and young women.<sup>55</sup> As Nazera Sadiq Wright argues in her work on Black girlhood in nineteenth-century US history, this genre of writing in some ways flattened the figure of the girl into a two-dimensional subject pressed into the service of a discourse about modernisation: whether written from a colonial perspective, or that of subaltern or anticolonial imaginaries of nationhood, community and modernity.<sup>56</sup> The global character of this discourse is no accident; however, scholars such as Francesca Orsini caution against reading the periodical literatures that emerged in South Asia at this time as peripheral to a global phenomenon.<sup>57</sup> Instead, they might be read as indicative of global networks of friendship, correspondence and a circulation of ideas that emerged across diverse geographies of cosmopolitanism.

Scholars of print culture in South Asia further emphasise the significance of literacy – particularly the practice of silent reading – to the cultivation of modern gendered subjectivities in the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> A growing common sense around women’s education, and the burgeoning of vernacular print cultures in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India played a significant role in advancing social causes.<sup>59</sup> Issues that were central to these magazines’ interests included legislation against child marriage, home-keeping based on scientific principles of hygiene, and promoting the cause of women’s education. These magazines often published articles in a didactic style, sometimes using cautionary tales to warn women of the

<sup>55</sup>N.S. Wright, *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana-Champaign, IL, 2016). See also George, *op. cit.*, 1–21. Lal, *op. cit.*, 200–08 has commented on the problem this poses for recuperating histories of young women’s everyday lives, which often entirely disappear from the archive.

<sup>56</sup>Wright, *op. cit.*, 23–59.

<sup>57</sup>F. Orsini, ‘The multilingual local in world literature’, *Comparative Literature*, 67, 4 (2015), 345–74.

<sup>58</sup>Sreenivas, *op. cit.*, 94–119.

<sup>59</sup>Raman, *op. cit.*, 151–202; G. Minault, ‘Educated Muslim women real and ideal’ in C. Gupta (ed.), *Gendering Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2012), 109–35.

dangers of early marriage and sexual immorality. As Mytheli Sreenivas has noted, this print culture was largely aligned with nationalist discourse, in that it sought to construct the home as the locus of a uniquely Indian modernity, embodied in the figure of the 'new woman'.<sup>60</sup>

The literature on gender and print culture in South Asia has drawn attention to practices through which Hindu and Muslim reformist movements laid claims to nationalist modernity through the figure of the 'new woman'. Charu Gupta has shown that publications in North India elaborated a discourse of gender that privileged a discourse of Hindu upper-caste respectability, by cultivating distance from practices associated with non-upper-caste and Muslim communities.<sup>61</sup> A substantial scholarship has also examined imaginaries of ideal girlhood that emerged from within Muslim reformist movements in Northern India and present-day Pakistan.<sup>62</sup> This scholarship demonstrates the significance of a discourse of emotional self-cultivation to the construction of modern political subjectivities for young women in this period.

Christian girlhood has, however, gone almost entirely unexamined.<sup>63</sup> Particularly in the south of India and Sri Lanka, where conversion had been more successful and Christian communities larger, a substantial print culture crystallised around the figure of the South Asian Christian girl. Both Western missionaries and educators as well as Indian Christians contributed to this print public sphere, which grew substantially over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This culture emerged with the colonial state's interest in creating a corpus of prose in the Tamil language that could be used to teach morals in schools.<sup>64</sup> By the early twentieth century, this print culture prominently included works by Indian Christian women, such as Krupabai Satthianadhan's English-language autobiographical novels *Saguna* and *Kamala*, which described the life and coming-of-age of a young woman in a family that had recently converted to Christianity.<sup>65</sup> Krupabai's mother-in-law, Annal Satthianadhan, also wrote a manual for modern young mothers in Tamil, titled *Nalla Tāy*, or 'the good mother'.<sup>66</sup> A substantial periodical literature, driven by Indian Christian youth, also emerged at this time, including publications of the SCM, as well as of Christian educational institutions

<sup>60</sup>Sreenivas, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup>C. Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity and Community: Women, Muslims, and the Hindu public in colonial India* (New Delhi, 2001).

<sup>62</sup>Khoja-Moolji, *op. cit.*; G. Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in Colonial India* (Oxford, 1998); B. Metcalf, 'An introduction to Bihishti Zewar' in B. Metcalf (ed.), *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (Berkeley, CA, 1992).

<sup>63</sup>A key exception is Kent, *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup>A.R. Venkatachalapathy, "'Enna Prayocanam?" Constructing the canon in colonial Tamilnadu', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 42, 4 (2005), 535–53.

<sup>65</sup>Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, *op. cit.*; Satthianadhan, *Kamala*, *op. cit.*

<sup>66</sup>A. Satthianadhan, *Nalla Tāy (The Good Mother)* (Madras, 1921).

such as the Madras Christian College and Women's Christian College. The Women's Christian College's *The Sunflower*, published from 1915 and still running, was a key site at which ideals of modern Christian girlhood were articulated, both by educators and social reformers – Indian and Western alike – as well as by young women themselves who reflected extensively on 'girlhood' and its meanings for Christians.

Located within this context, the YWCA's *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* offers a vignette of ideal Christian girlhood, as imagined by its mostly Western contributors, within international associational life in South Asia. Published on a monthly basis between 1908 and 1916, the periodical appeared at a time when the YWCA was undergoing substantial change, evolving from what was primarily an evangelical organisation into a transnational network of professional social workers, educators and nurses.<sup>67</sup> In this period, the YWCA would foray into campaigns for women's citizenship rights in Britain: for instance, it supported the demand for suffrage, movements for women workers' rights, and for the appointment of women police.<sup>68</sup> In staking claims for women's participation in the public sphere, it adopted a blended discourse that combined Christian and secular elements. Thus, religious representations of women's natures and special suitedness to caring roles sat alongside arguments about women's opportunities for training and qualifications within a non-religious sphere.<sup>69</sup>

In colonial contexts – including India – as well as in Britain and North America, the YWCA's main role was to offer respectable accommodation for the growing number of young women who sought education and work in cities, far away from their families.<sup>70</sup> In India, missionaries established hostels – boarding houses – from the early nineteenth century. While the earliest hostels typically housed and educated girls from non-elite castes towards livelihoods as housekeepers and child-minders, by the late nineteenth century, a growing number of hostels welcomed middle-class women who sought office employment, or education at the new public universities in India's major cities.<sup>71</sup> In Sri Lanka, too, boarding schools for girls became, by the turn of the twentieth century, the centrepiece of gendered modernity.<sup>72</sup> The YWCA's hostels catered to this latter category: educated women who were either members of the minuscule minority seeking

<sup>67</sup>R. Semple, *Missionary Women: Gender, professionalism and the Victorian idea of Christian mission* (Woodbridge, 2003), 190–228; Izzo, *op. cit.*, 44–65; Robertson, *op. cit.*, 71–100.

<sup>68</sup>C. Beaumont, 'Fighting for the 'Privileges of Citizenship': the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), feminism and the women's movement, 1928–1945', *Women's History Review* 23, 3 (2014), 463–79.

<sup>69</sup>Izzo, *op. cit.*, 19–43.

<sup>70</sup>P.S. Sengupta, *A Hundred Years of Service: Centenary volume of the Calcutta YWCA, 1878–1978* (Calcutta, 1987), 21–24; Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 10–26.

<sup>71</sup>Krishnan, *op. cit.*, 581–85.

<sup>72</sup>de Alwis, *op. cit.*, 22–26; Jayawardena, *Nobodies to Somebodies*, *op. cit.*, 279–301.



university education, or unmarried graduates who were office workers, nurses and teachers.<sup>73</sup>

The YWCA also offered spaces for sports and physical exercise for women in Indian cities – at the time, a rarity.<sup>74</sup> Its grounds were used by local girls' schools and colleges for physical education and training, as well as for competitive sporting matches.<sup>75</sup> The YWCA was thus engaged in cultivating a transnational Christian imaginary of modern girlhood: rooted in an intellectual and emotional project, as well as in the embodied making of healthy girls' bodies through sports and physical activity. The role of sports in this reformist discourse could also be seen in YWCA activities elsewhere, with the North American branches explicitly positioning sport as a Christian and moral alternative to the working-class dance hall.<sup>76</sup>

The form of the journal was typical of the internationalist press of the time – exemplified by periodicals such as the international suffrage monthly, *Jus Suffragii* – and seeking to create a sense of community by reporting on events in the regions of the periodical's reach.<sup>77</sup> Each issue usually included news from YWCA 'homes' in different Indian and Sri Lankan cities: typically, Madras, Bombay, Calicut, Delhi, Kandy and Colombo. Issues featured reports of Bible-study camps, bazaars to raise funds, and social affairs honouring women graduates of nearby Christian Colleges.<sup>78</sup> Some pieces offered practical advice on home remedies for common health conditions, cooking and dressmaking.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, reports from YWCA branches elsewhere in the world forged a sense of interconnectedness. In descriptions of activities at South Asian YWCA branches, the magazine similarly tended to emphasise the international character of everyday life: for instance, discussing visitors from abroad.

Much like other women's periodicals circulated in India at this time, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* also typically carried a serialised moral story.<sup>80</sup> In addition to this, there were essays that emphasised female agency in a scriptural context – for instance, a series in 1914 that focused on Women of the Old Testament – and stories about inspiring and non-

<sup>73</sup>Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup>Sengupta, *op. cit.*

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*; G. Ambat, *More Grasps to Reach: One hundred years of the Madras YWCA* (Madras, 1992).

<sup>76</sup>Izzo, *op. cit.*, 22; Robertson, *op. cit.*, 49.

<sup>77</sup>S. Oldfield, 'Mary Sheepshanks edits an internationalist suffrage monthly in wartime: *Jus Suffragii* 1914–19', *Women's History Review* 12, 1 (2003), 119–34; J. Haggis and M. Allen, 'Imperial emotions: affective communities of mission in British Protestant women's missionary publications c.1880–1920', *Journal of Social History*, 41, 3, (2008), 691–716.

<sup>78</sup>For instance, see 'A quiet Christmas in camp', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 2 (1913), 34–35; 'An account for the opening of YWCA Holiday Home in Darjeeling', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 6 (1913), 122–23.

<sup>79</sup>For example, 'Domestic science page: the young housewife', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 17, 10 (1915), 196, and J. Simpson, 'Dressmaking lessons: man's pyjama suit', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 17, 12 (1915), 230–31.

<sup>80</sup>For example, see 'Maid Elsa', on the tribulations of a girl born into many sorrows, carried in late 1912 and 1913. The first chapter appears in October 1912 and then carries on for eight chapters: M.R. Dobson, 'Maid Elsa', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 14, 10 (1912), 188–89.



Christian women in Indian folklore.<sup>81</sup> Biblical stories were often presented with an explicit anchor to Indian contexts. For instance, the story of Ruth in the Old Testament is presented, in a 1913 issue, as a model for good relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.<sup>82</sup> These narratives emphasised women's political agency as occurring within a context of essential sexual difference, as well as through social service, rather than enabled by direct or collective political action.

Internationalism emerges through *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* as a disciplining discourse. In the pages of this magazine, participation in a new global public sphere of Christian women's associational life is contingent on the cultivation of a set of key qualities: enterprise, cheeriness and professionalism. As such, the discourse of modern Christian womanhood in this magazine clearly indicates the convergence between transnational cultures of liberal internationalism and the civilising discourse of imperialism. As I show below, the discourse of emotional cultivation articulated by publications such as *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* shaped the ways in which young South Asian women positioned themselves both as minority religious subjects on the margins of upper-caste – or in Sri Lanka, Buddhist – nationalist community, and within an international sphere of Christian humanitarianism.

### Enterprising girlhood

The theme of personality and enterprise appears in many articles published in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*. The ideal YWCA woman is often presented as cultivated, charming and well dressed. One article advises: 'Do all you can to make yourself attractive. It is natural and right that a woman should make her appearance as charming as she can'.<sup>83</sup> It goes on, however, to caution that this charm should be natural, and born out of a display of good taste, rather than through the wearing of 'cheap finery'.<sup>84</sup> This view of the 'well-dressed' girl who is not garish or seen as lacking in taste was common in this period, and missionaries and educators particularly worried that Indian girls educated in Christian institutions would pick up unseemly habits of dress that did not suit them, in an effort to appear more Western.<sup>85</sup> In *Saguna*, a book by the Indian Christian writer Krupabai Sathianadhan,

<sup>81</sup>The series on women in the Old Testament begins with 'Women of the Old Testament', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 16, 2, (1914), 28, and continues for seven issues. An example of a story about Indian women in local folklore, presented as heroines, is 'Two Rajput heroines', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 17, 8, (1915), 151–55.

<sup>82</sup>'Unselfish love', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 4 (1913), 65–66.

<sup>83</sup>L. Whitney, 'Talks with girls: social life', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 10, 1 (1908), 12–13.

<sup>84</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>E. McDougall and M.E. Roberts, *Statement by Miss Roberts and Miss McDougall upon Investigations into Women's Education in India During Their Tour 1912–1913* (Edinburgh, 1913).

the theme appears in the protagonist's struggle to appear cosmopolitan and grown-up, without seeming to lack taste.<sup>86</sup>

The care for physical appearance, as it appears in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, is entangled with the cultivation of a personality that is attractive, dynamic and engaging. In the piece discussed at the beginning of this section, the author suggests that failing to change would imply a lack of self-development. The prognosis the author offers is grim: 'If we do not grow, we shall soon be put on the shelf, and marked "Not Wanted", and a girl must want to be wanted if she has anything in her'.<sup>87</sup> This piece also offers tips on achieving such popularity and elaborates on how one might come to be seen as intelligent and engaging:

Drawing rooms and verandahs are the scenes of social life; leave your books about them freely, especially the ones you are reading. Without being thought a blue stocking or having the desire to show off a little knowledge, you will often find that a book in your near neighbourhood is a help to your conversation.<sup>88</sup>

Another piece, titled 'Health and beauty', links the importance of physical appearance to the 'healthy mind – healthy body' refrain that both the YMCA and YWCA espoused in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>89</sup> In this piece, the author frames this as an injunction to look beneath the surface when the young woman seeks to beautify herself: for instance, problems of the skin that appear fixable with make-up and powder might really suggest anaemia or poor digestion. The article also exhorts young women to participate in 'drills' for exercise, so as to develop proper 'carriage' and a 'graceful walk'.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, it is evident that the YWCA organised various 'drills' – that is, callisthenics classes – including 'hoop drills'.<sup>91</sup> The picture of ideal girlhood that emerges from these discussions is that of an enterprising girl: one who actively works on herself – in mind, and in body – and seeks to be liked and admired by those around her.

Indeed, a successful YWCA woman, it would seem, was to be 'clubbable'. As Mrinalini Sinha notes, elite social clubs in colonial India played a central role in reproducing the sexual and racial logics of imperialism through a culture of self-fashioning.<sup>92</sup> The YWCA did not belong to this milieu. However, everyday life at the YWCA was geared towards inculcating young women into a distinctly colonial mode of public life, albeit within a middle-class Christian context, through the cultivation of a set of aesthetic

<sup>86</sup>Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, *op. cit.*

<sup>87</sup>Whitney, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>89</sup>'Health and beauty', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 2 (1913), 31–33. On the 'healthy body, healthy mind' discourse of the YWCA, see Izzo, *op. cit.*, 89–152. Robertson, *op. cit.*, 45–70.

<sup>90</sup>'Health and beauty', *op. cit.*, 32.

<sup>91</sup>An example is in 'Bombay supplement', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 13, 10 (1911), 198.

<sup>92</sup>M. Sinha, 'Britishness, clubbability, and the colonial public sphere: the genealogy of an imperial institution in colonial India', *Journal of British Studies*, 40, 4 (2001), 489–521.

dispositions. So, for instance, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* reported on social affairs including tea parties, given for both visitors and new members.<sup>93</sup>

For elite South Asian Christians, participation at such events organised by international Christian associations was central to their project of social mobility. Eliza Kent's work on conversion and gender emphasises the role that Christian missionaries and international organisations played in shaping Christian sartorial practice in Southern India.<sup>94</sup> The articles on health and beauty examined in this section demonstrate how invested organisations like the YWCA were in cultivating a transnationally shared ethic of modern Christian girlhood, to which appropriate dress and attention to appearance were important. Indeed, this emphasis complements that of Christian educational institutions of the time, such as Women's Christian College in Madras, which organised dinner parties and teas where young Indian Christian women were meant to learn social graces.

### Happy domesticity

The articles in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* also present ideal girlhood as rooted in domesticity and explicitly divorced from direct political action. A piece notes about the ideal YWCA woman:

She is seen at best in her own home – among the common everyday duties which fall to the lot of a woman. She is one of those quiet soothing women you like to have near you when you are sick, one who moves noiselessly about the room, knows exactly what you want, and does not bother you every other minute with enquiries as to how you are feeling now.<sup>95</sup>

Closely aligned with this ideal of quiet domesticity is one of selfless service, both in the intimate realm and in the world at large, which is imagined in this discourse as the home scaled up. In some ways, this set of ideas complicates the discussion of enterprising personality in the section above, to suggest the importance of interiority. A moral story, 'Where she failed', published in the periodical in 1908, warns specifically of the temptation to become outwardly helpful and engaging entirely for selfish ends.<sup>96</sup> Instead, the author writes that the ideal YWCA woman must embody a spirit of service that emanates from her inner being.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>93</sup>For instance, see a description of a tea reception hosted for members and visitors in Kandy in 'Kandy', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 12, 8 (1910), 80. Also, 'Bombay supplement', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 18, 1, (1916), 18.

<sup>94</sup>Kent, *op. cit.*, 199–234.

<sup>95</sup>L. Mawson, 'An ideal woman', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 1, 5 (1910), 91.

<sup>96</sup>M.W. Adams, 'Where she failed', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 10, 6 (1908), 114.

<sup>97</sup>*ibid.*

In India, social service organisations were the main mode through which middle-class political culture was materialised.<sup>98</sup> The idiom of service was not necessarily divorced in mainstream Indian politics from direct political action – famously, the Gandhi-led nationalist movement that would grow from the 1920s focused both on social service as anticolonial action and on acts of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the imperial regime.<sup>99</sup> Middle-class women’s associational life in Indian cities was thus deeply imbricated within the international humanitarian discourse of service, as a site at which citizenship could be made active. Indeed, sociologists have argued that the performance of social service was also a site at which distinction was articulated in early and mid-twentieth-century India: by engaging in acts of service, middle-class Indian women distanced themselves from those in need of their help.<sup>100</sup> Association with the YWCA and similar organisations, as well as with Christian educational institutions, no doubt allowed young Indian women to enact this politics of distance and distinction.

The goal of this social service was an ideal of happiness. A 1912 editorial from *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* states directly: ‘what is the chief factor in being happy? Service above all’.<sup>101</sup> In the writing on a cheery disposition that appears in the magazine, happiness is typically presented as something to be actively worked towards, as a matter of living a thankful Christian life. For instance, one short note on cheeriness tells readers:

A sunshiny disposition is a gift from God . . . If we go persistently to work to cultivate a sunshiny disposition, our efforts will at length be rewarded, and we shall be the possessors of a bright- ness and cheeriness scarcely distinguishable from that bestowed as a natural gift.<sup>102</sup>

In another piece, the writer likens happiness to habits: something that needs practice to be properly learnt.<sup>103</sup> This piece goes on to instruct young women that by choosing contentment in their everyday lives, rather than ‘crying over spilt milk’ or desiring what is out of their reach, they will find happiness.<sup>104</sup> A 1912 poem titled ‘On the Bright Side’ concludes:

Better to weave in the web of Life  
A bright and golden filling,  
And to do God’s will with a ready heart  
And hands that are swift and willing,  
Than to snap the delicate slender threads  
Of our curious lives asunder,

<sup>98</sup>C.A. Watt, *Serving the Nation: Cultures of service, association and citizenship* (Oxford, 2005).

<sup>99</sup>*ibid.*, 171–201.

<sup>100</sup>P. Caplan, *Class and Gender in India: Women and their organisations in a South Indian city* (London, 1985).

<sup>101</sup>‘Editorial’, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 14, 2 (1912), 22.

<sup>102</sup>Untitled piece by A.L. Griggs, in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 14, 8 (1912), 146.

<sup>103</sup>‘Editorial’, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 2 (1913), 21.

<sup>104</sup>*ibid.*

And then blame Him for the tangled ends,  
And sit and grieve, and wonder.<sup>105</sup>

This emphasis on happiness as a matter of affective orientation towards what is achievable and salutary within a normative conception of domestic life is characteristic of the discourse on gender in international associational life in this period. In her memoir of life as Principal of Women's Christian College, Eleanor McDougall writes about Indian women's tendency to take offence and be unhappy as one of the main issues holding them back from what she sees as a path towards proper modern subjectivity.<sup>106</sup> Another piece in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* draws on a Biblical story to say that even to King Solomon, mirth was the most important quality for a good life. However, the essay qualifies that this mirth is not to be found in 'feeble jokes' or in 'vapid giggling', but in happiness that is born out of a Christian disposition to look on the bright side no matter what.<sup>107</sup> Krupabai Saththianadhan offers a more nuanced view in an essay on 'Women's influence at home'.<sup>108</sup> She writes that emotional bitterness stands in the way of social progress because unhappiness crushes young women's will to learn, and to participate in a process of self-making.<sup>109</sup>

In her critical work on happiness in feminist theory, Sara Ahmed argues that this emotion enacts a disciplinary function: it positions certain futures and ways of being as desirable and leading to positive futures, foreclosing others.<sup>110</sup> Happiness serves, in Ahmed's writing, to reinforce the boundaries of ethical projects of self-making: locating desires and potentials that lie outside within a realm of potential discontent and unhappiness. Further, Christian humanitarian communities in this period typically regarded emotions such as discontent and anger as lacking in the Christian spirit of friendship and openness that undergirded pacifist international life – indeed, that enabled projects of cross-cultural friendship.<sup>111</sup> Located firmly in this context, the discourse of happiness in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* circumscribes young South Asian Christian women's agency within a domestic and service-oriented sphere, in which emotions of anger and discontent have little place.

Indeed, a piece on 'Depression', published in 1913, argues that the cause of 'spiritual sorrow' – which would result in an inability to be cheery and happy – is sin, and the tendency to succumb to temptation.<sup>112</sup> To avoid this, the article recommends that the reader should cultivate a personal

<sup>105</sup>M.A. Kidder, 'The bright side', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 14, 11 (1912), 207.

<sup>106</sup>McDougall, *op. cit.*

<sup>107</sup>'Editorial', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 6 (1913), 107.

<sup>108</sup>Saththianadhan, 'Women's influence at home' in Saththianadhan, *Miscellaneous Writings*, *op. cit.*, 1–8.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>110</sup>S. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC, 2010).

<sup>111</sup>P. Appelbaum, *Kingdom to commune: Protestant pacifist culture between World War I and the Vietnam era*. (Chapel Hill, 2009).

<sup>112</sup>A.M.R. Dobson, 'Depression', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 11 (1913), 217–18.

relationship with God as a way of remaining always on the path of a good Christian life.<sup>113</sup> A poem published in 1912 counsels the reader: 'There's nothing more heavenly, nothing more fair/On ocean, on earth, or high in the air/As this true cure for grief and despair/Smiles, brave smiles'.<sup>114</sup>

## Professionalisation

The ideal YWCA woman is, finally, a professional. As historians of women's voluntary organisations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have shown, the most significant change that occurred in women's international associational life at this time was the professionalisation of their work as carers and social workers.<sup>115</sup> As a rich historical scholarship points out, the education of women in South Asia had its origins in the imperative – shared by Indian reformers and nationalists, the colonial government, and Western and Christian missionaries alike – to teach mothercraft, home science and household arts, a group of subjects developed in the early twentieth century as a means to make modern home-keepers and mothers of women.<sup>116</sup>

'Home Science' – as an essay in Women's Christian College's *The Sunflower* argues – is an inappropriate name for a subject whose scope is much wider than the home, and which is really a science of the immediate environment.<sup>117</sup> This subject, the writer suggests, not only trains young women to be better homemakers, but also expands public knowledge on scientific techniques of child rearing and the psychology of parenting, food preparation and nutrition conservation, as well as environmental science for home management.<sup>118</sup> 'Home Science' or 'Household Arts' programmes, as they were variously called, typically became sites at which the contours of 'proper' femininity could be debated, and the purposes of women's education made clearer.

The wider social context for the professionalisation of women's domestic roles was the centring of the conjugal couple and of companionate marriage within the family unit in early twentieth-century India. As Mytheli Sreenivas notes, both the reading woman with a well-developed interiority, and companionate marriage became, in this period, yardsticks of modernity in South India, in which Indian reformers of all faiths were as invested as was

<sup>113</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>114</sup>'Smiles', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 15, 2 (1912), 22.

<sup>115</sup>Semple, *op. cit.*, 1–16. E. Prevost, 'Married to the mission field: gender, Christianity, and professionalization in Britain and Colonial Africa, 1865–1914' *Journal of British Studies*, 47, 4 (2008), 796–826; J. Haggis, 'A heart that has felt the love of God and longs for others to know it': conventions of gender, tensions of self and constructions of difference in offering to be a lady missionary', *Women's History Review*, 7, 2 (1998), 171–93.

<sup>116</sup>M. Hancock, 'Home Science and the nationalization of domesticity in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 35, 4 (2001), 871–903; de Alwis, *op. cit.*, 22–26.

<sup>117</sup>'B.Sc. in Home Science offered', *The Sunflower* (1943), 2–3.

<sup>118</sup>*ibid.*

the liberal imperial project.<sup>119</sup> The modern home – as the place of emotional cultivation, of scientific food preparation, and of wholesome and healthy living – became, therefore, the domain of expertise for highly educated women. This context is reflected in the content of *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, where professionalisation appears as an expansion into a world of labour that is taken to be naturally feminine. For instance, an article titled ‘Should women be educated like men?’ argues that it is because women play the all-important role of managing the household that they need an equal education, which would enable them to bring scientific training to this purpose.<sup>120</sup> Reiterating a common sentiment at this time – expressed equally by Indian social reformers of all faiths – the article argues that a woman who is educated equal to men would make for a better and more modern wife: able to converse with her husband on topics of importance, rather than being ‘an ornament to a drawing room’.<sup>121</sup> Equal education for women, the author of the piece contends, would not displace women from their domestic duties but enable them to perform them with precision, while also extending their skills towards the world – most importantly as the teachers of their own children.<sup>122</sup>

Another article on ‘A young woman’s business life’ echoes the argument made in the previous section on the disciplinary role of happiness.<sup>123</sup> The author – identified only as H.F. – writes that work is the most appropriately Christian path towards happiness. This, the author tells us, is achievable by cultivating six key qualities that are essential to a successful professional life: order, punctuality, perseverance, tact, enthusiasm and cheerfulness. The author elaborates on each quality and ultimately dwells on the matter of happiness at length, writing: ‘be happy in your lifework! There is a duty of happiness, though many of us have failed to learn it’.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, the author holds that cheerfulness is the most important of the qualities because the other dispositions that young women are exhorted to cultivate are all geared towards the goal of attaining happiness.

Professionalism thus advances the ethical project materialised by *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, centring a vision of happiness rooted in a gendered ideal of appropriate agency that is simultaneously enabling – exhorting young women to make a difference in the world, and to have occupations – and circumscribing in that it limits their sphere of action within a domestic ideal. It is nevertheless also evident, as in the case of the YWCA in the West, that the organisation especially sought out young

<sup>119</sup>Sreenivas, *op. cit.*

<sup>120</sup>E. J. Warlow, ‘Should women be educated like men?’, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 18, 6 (1916), 111–13.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup>H.F., ‘A young woman’s business life’, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 10, 7 (1908), 133–35.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, 134.



working women and aimed to provide a supportive community for them. A 1916 article describes a 'Red Rose Tea' event, given for 'business girls' with invitations sent to women employed at the largest commercial firms in Bombay (now Mumbai).<sup>125</sup> The event itself consisted of competitions – such as an Advertisement contest – centred on business skills. Forms to join the YWCA were then distributed to all and the report notes that there was considerable take-up after such events.

Many young women who were members of South Asian YWCA branches and participated in SCM work went on to careers as teachers, social workers and carers not only in their own countries but often elsewhere in Asia, as well as in Northern Africa and the Pacific Islands. This pattern would become more evident in the subsequent decades. It is worth noting that the first college for women in Southern India was only established in 1914 when the Government of the Presidency of Madras asked Dorothy de la Hey to found such an institution. The first Christian college was established the following year, when a group of British and American missionary societies with close ties to the YWCA established Women's Christian College. As such, much of the writing that is available from women students comes from the period near the end of *The Young Women of India and Ceylon's* life, and follows the shifts that occurred as the Christian community became a vocal and politically active minority in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.<sup>126</sup>

It is also worth noting that a widely understood watershed to Indian Christians' departure from missionary theology also came in the 1910s, presaging the shifts to follow: Bishop VS Azariah's participation in the 1910 World Missionary Conference, where he called for an ethic of friendship over imperial hierarchy.<sup>127</sup> By the 1930s, Indian Christian women were established professional members of global Christian networks. In the 1930s, a survey by Women's Christian College in Madras – which continued to work closely with the YWCA and was embedded in much the same networks of Christian women's associations – showed that over 60% of its alumnae were engaged in such work as professionals.<sup>128</sup> In this, the YWCA enabled young Christian women in South Asia to cultivate a sense of belonging to a domain of Christian internationalist social work.

## Tensions and contestations

Overall, *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* enacted a project of emotional discipline in which young women were exhorted to cultivate a sunny,

<sup>125</sup>'Bombay supplement', *The Young Women of India and Ceylon*, 13, 10 (1911), 198.

<sup>126</sup>Mallampalli, *op. cit.*

<sup>127</sup>S.B. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the travails of Christianity in British India* (London, 2019), 36–66 and 138–75.

<sup>128</sup>'Activities of our old students', *The Sunflower*, 34 (1935), 31–36.

self-improving disposition as the basis for proper Christian womanhood. In this section, I draw closer attention to the ways in which this discourse shaped the lives of young South Asian Christian women. In doing so, I take my cue from feminist scholars of religion and agency in not romanticising resistance but instead asking how young South Asian Christian women inhabited an ethic of religious womanhood.<sup>129</sup> Approaching the question through this lens allows for a complex picture to emerge: South Asian Christian women engaged in a balancing act that both reiterated and contested aspects of missionary discourse about ‘good’ womanhood.

Krupabai Satthianadhan’s *Saguna*, published in 1895, shows an early example of how Christian women sought to privilege an ethic of friendship and personal religious faith over missionary theology. In her text, Satthianadhan draws attention to the value of a personal Christian God, over Hindu philosophical conceptions of deity, for the everyday support that a life without sin might need. Conversion to Christianity is thus, for Satthianadhan, a deeply individual matter, and centres on the cultivation of a personal relationship to a father-like deity who demands a set of emotional qualities from his children.<sup>130</sup> Simultaneously, Satthianadhan’s faith in such a personal God means that she resists civilisational narratives about Indian girls as morally lacking, instead displacing such weakness onto the effects of ‘superstition’, and lack of Christian education.<sup>131</sup>

Over four decades later, a similar perspective can be seen in how members of Women’s Christian College responded to the memoirs of the institution’s first principal, Eleanor McDougall. McDougall had characterised the students as ‘lamps in the wind’ – morally feeble figures in need of her protection.<sup>132</sup> The Indian staff and students distanced themselves from her reading of their lives, instead asserting their sense of betrayal at their former head’s indiscretion and retelling of their lives within an imperialist framework.<sup>133</sup> Invoking internationalism against imperialism, the Indian women at the college affirmed their commitment to a Christian ethic of friendship across racial lines, and their right to participate in such a community in equal terms.<sup>134</sup>

In the same period, the question of friendship and service also manifested itself in other discussions at Women’s Christian College, as reported in *The Sunflower*. In 1940, the College’s Student Senate debated the question of going on strike in solidarity with nationalist leaders who had been

<sup>129</sup>L. Abu-Lughod, ‘The romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women’, *American Ethnologist*, 17, 1 (1990), 41–55; S. Mahmood, ‘Feminist theory, agency, and the liberatory subject: some reflections on the Islamic revival in Egypt’, *Temenos – Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, 42, 1 (2006), 31–71.

<sup>130</sup>Satthianadhan, *Saguna*, *op. cit.*, 51–57.

<sup>131</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>132</sup>McDougall, *op. cit.*

<sup>133</sup>Krishnan, *op. cit.*, 585–88.

<sup>134</sup>*ibid.*

imprisoned in the preceding year.<sup>135</sup> According to *The Sunflower*, the college's Student Senate met to discuss possible action. The students – mainly members of South India's sizeable Christian minority – were conflicted. At their meeting, they chose not to go on strike, and instead resolved to hold a prayer meeting and form a Politics Club. Their reason was that as young Christian women, looking inward and prioritising service would be most appropriate, rather than engaging in outward-facing politics.<sup>136</sup> These young women's position maps onto their sympathy for the nationalist project a set of emotional dispositions taught within Christian internationalist communities to middle-class girls, South Asian and White alike. This approach individualises political questions into a matter of personal habit and self-cultivation.

Yet in adopting this stance, elite Indian women enacted their own civilisational projects – and were encouraged to do so within missionary communities and institutions – on those they saw as more 'backward' than them. Mirroring racialised and classed practices of social work that Western women undertook in this period, students at Women's Christian College went into slums and other low-income neighbourhoods to perform social service acts that ranged from advice on nutrition and hygiene to practical support for mothers. In a 1935 essay, a student who participated in such activities described the subjects of her charity as 'outcaste': 'they are servants, untouchable and their poverty is appalling, and until economic conditions are better and education is provided for the people, they cannot enter into their full inheritance that is theirs in Christ'.<sup>137</sup> Her framing reiterates the racist and classist logic that undergirded the civilising mission of Christian internationalist organisations like the YWCA, and the missionary societies that governed Women's Christian College, albeit mapped onto caste.<sup>138</sup> The Christian internationalist discourse about emotions and femininity that is evident from *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* thus also served to enable a project of class and caste distinction for the elite South Asian women who participated in such communities.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on the YWCA periodical *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* to argue that women's international associational culture in the early twentieth century both created the conditions for, and circumscribed girls' and young women's agency within, discourses about

<sup>135</sup> 'Education and Politics', *The Sunflower*, 40 (1941), 16–19.

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> J. Moses, 'Dharapuram', *The Sunflower*, 34 (1935), 33–35.

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.* For an example of the same logic applied within an anti-Black paradigm by South Asian women, see E. Jacob, 'Ethiopia through the eyes of an alumna', *The Sunflower*, 53 (1953), 9–11.

domesticity, enterprise and professionalism. Internationalist political culture in the early twentieth century reflected liberal imperialism's investments in middle-class morality, espousing a politics of service and suasion over confrontation. *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* is a paradigmatic example of how this ethic was cultivated in a colonial context, where the YWCA and similar organisations played significant roles in the modernising enterprise of imperialism. The discourse in this magazine demonstrates the ways in which opportunities for participation in a new public sphere of youth political activity were also sites of discipline.

This article has also located *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* at a moment of impending transformation in the lives of the South Asian Christian community in the early twentieth century. In the years after the journal ceased publication, 'native Christians' would go on to play defining roles in articulating a new theology centred on caste liberation, and an anticolonial spirit. In the course of this, organisations such as the YWCA gradually changed, becoming both more Indianised and less centred on evangelical work. Such tensions are evident even in the publications that emerged in the first two decades of the YWCA's work in India. For instance, Wilson and Stevenson note in their history of the organisation's first 50 years that even from the beginning in Madras, all worship and Bible study was conducted in Tamil and Telugu – the languages spoken most commonly on India's south-eastern coast – at the insistence of the Indian membership, despite the fact that this meant that British and Anglo-Indian members were unable to participate.<sup>139</sup>

In conclusion, I want to consider the implications of the arguments this article has made for thinking about the ways in which 'girlhood' is positioned within the development discourse that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, to which I position early twentieth-century humanitarian internationalism as a predecessor.<sup>140</sup> The three themes I have highlighted here – those of enterprise, positivity and professionalism – are in many ways much more easily available to feminist scholars as central tenets of neoliberal ideology that emerged in the late twentieth century.<sup>141</sup> Scholars of micro-credit, for instance, have highlighted that these qualities are often attributed to 'third-world women' as low-risk recipients of loans.<sup>142</sup> Positivity and enterprise are also emphasised in school curricula for children, as a deflection from crushing structural disadvantage that has complicated transitions to adulthood for many.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>139</sup>Wilson and Stevenson, *op. cit.*, 151–56.

<sup>140</sup>Fischer-Tiné, *op. cit.*

<sup>141</sup>O. Koffman and R. Gill, "The revolution will be led by a 12-year-old girl": girl power and global biopolitics', *Feminist Review*, 105, 1 (2013), 83–102; Tambe, *op. cit.*

<sup>142</sup>A. Roy, 'Subjects of risk: technologies of gender in the making of millennial modernity', *Public Culture*, 24, 1 66 (2012), 131–55.

<sup>143</sup>J.L. Chua, 'Making time for the children: self-temporalization and the cultivation of the antisuicidal subject in South India', *Cultural Anthropology*, 26, 1 (2011), 112–37.

Scholarship in critical development studies increasingly gestures to the colonial roots of contemporary neoliberal discourse that seeks to disable collective action while simultaneously engaging its subjects in projects of self-making towards becoming ‘good’ subjects of development.<sup>144</sup> Most significantly, Ashwini Tambe argues that discourses about girlhood and young womanhood that emerged through internationalist discourse in the early twentieth century continue to directly inform the practice of international development.<sup>145</sup>

Building on this scholarship, then, I would position the discourse on girlhood and young womanhood in *The Young Women of India and Ceylon* as indicative of a gendered discourse of the self within associational cultures that would go on to shape the development imaginaries that undergird young women’s lives in South Asia today. Internationalism, in this context, plays the contradictory role that this article has highlighted: on the one hand enabling opportunities for professionalisation and collaboration with a transnational community, while on the other circumscribing South Asian women’s agency within the discourses and agendas of a Euro-American and middle-class imaginary of social progress.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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<sup>144</sup>J.L. Chua, *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and suicide in globalising South India* (Berkeley, CA, 2014); C. Jeffery, P. Jeffery and R. Jeffery, *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, masculinities, and unemployment in North India* (Palo Alto, CA, 2008).

<sup>145</sup>Tambe, *op. cit.*, 142–50.