



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-IV, Issue-I, July 2017, Page No. 194-202

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711 Website:

<http://www.ijhsss.com>

Women Workers in Call Centers: The Dilemma of Empowerment and Exploitation

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Abstract

As a result of globalization, in the late 1990s, more than 500 companies in U.S. began moving customer service jobs to India. These companies of customer services are called Call Centres. A significant percentage of workers employed by this industry are female, but the social construction of women's role in the society conflict with their participation in the paid labor force.

This paper will focus on the employment patterns in call centres, issue of mobility of women workers who are doing night shifts, condition of work, wage differences between women and men workers etc. This paper also discusses the issue of Feminization of Labor. An explanatory and exploratory method is used to write this paper.

Participation in this industry gives some women a new form of independence because they are able to access night spaces in ways that were previously deemed off limits. Yet they are hampered by the assumption that women embody a space of vulnerability. Because of such attitude of society towards women workers stop them to reach at higher positions. This paper suggests that society should change their attitude towards women workers and start seeing them as normal as day workers or their male co-workers, who also do night shifts.

Employment in call centres brings both, opportunities as well as challenges to women workers. Besides providing a sense of economic independence and physical mobility, employment in call centres also bring negative impact like health hazards, wages difference jobs without guarantee etc. This paper will suggest various strategies to overcome the challenges that women face in call centres.

Key words: *Employment, Mobility, Wage Differences, Feminization of Labor, economic independence.*

Introduction: Globalization, the growing integration of economies and societies around the world, is a complex phenomenon that is variously affecting different regions, countries and their population. It does not have a uniform character in every country. To some, it is not only a natural phenomenon but also something good for the world. For others, there is a

much deeper concern about the challenges and risks associated with the globalization. Free trade and free market has become the core of current phase of globalization. It was also assumed that in our country the liberalization and the greater integration of Indian economy with world capitalism, would led to expended international trade and large inflow of capital and investment from across the Globe. Global brand names, financial interests, and commodities (including the cultural variety) have fixed spaces for themselves in the Indian market, particularly, the metropolitan urban market.

In the late 1990s, as the result of globalization in India, many Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) are settled under the neo-economic policy, and among this new service sector that has developed itself, call centres are the most significant in terms of employment. More than 500 companies in the United States begun moving costumer service jobs to India, because of the availability of English speaking population and lower wages than those paid to US workers. These companies of customer service are called call centres and fall under the umbrella of Business Process Outsourcing (BPO).Ever since then, India's BPO industry has never looked back, and it continues to grow. According to NASSCOM study conducted in 2007, the Indian BPO industry grew 7 times the annual GDP growth. In 2009, the industry contributed nearly 2.5 per cent to the GDP. NASSCOM in 2012 also estimated that the market for global Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) is predicted to triple in size by 2020.

Objective of the Study: Call centres emerged about 30 to40 years ago, and started forming a significant source of employment in the west; however since the early 1990s (in the era of globalization) they have expended dramatically to become element of multi-billion-dollar industry. India has a six billion dollar a year call centre industry and there are plenty of experienced Indian call centres. In 2002, a decade after 1991 reform, NASSCOM estimated that 336 call centres has emerged throughout India. By 2006, approximately 4, 70,000 women and men are working in this industry. The main objectives of this study are:

- To study the profile of women employees working in the call centres.
- To study the problems faced by women employees in the call centres.
- To study whether the employer is concerned about the problems of women employees.
- To study the issues related to health of the women workers in the call centres.
- To study the problem faced by women workers in doing night shifts.

Literature Review: Anne bonds (2006) discussed in her article that 70% of workforce in call centres across the world comprise of women. In 2004, in United States call centre industry reported 66% of women workers. But it also found out that in all call centres women workers are paid lesser than their male counter parts. Women workers are concentrated in lower paying jobs within call centres. For instance, more women can be found in routinalised and clerical jobs where more men can be found in more technical, software related employment in telecommunication sectors.

Dipa Dube , Indrajit Dube , Bhagwan R. Gawali & Subechhya Haldar (2012) discussed that despite the guarantee of equality in the constitution of India, it is perceived that women employed in BPO industry in India are not enjoying equality when it comes to promotion or increments as compared to their male counterparts. Authors suggested that it is most important to have gender friendly environment in the organization where both men and women are employed. Both genders should be given equal opportunities in term of promotions, salary and other benefits.

According to Swasti Mitter and Cecila Ng, in their book that women workers at call centres, which constitute up to 70 per cent of the workforce in some BPOs, seem to be satisfied and enjoy their work, which has given them more freedom and autonomy. Women especially in India have found that the wages they earn enable them to experience a new freedom and autonomy. In a study of call centre workers in Malaysia and India, Cecila and Mitter say women in both countries point out that they have learnt new skills and some have even become more assertive persons. The acquired skills, ranging from so-called soft skills like communication, listening and interpersonal skills to product knowledge and technical competency, have given the women a sense of confidence in dealing, both with their customers and with society at large.

Dr. kausar jahan ara begum (2013) talked about the night shift that is a significant factor related to the BPO industry in India. She suggested that researches on night hours of work and reproductive health reported that irregular hours of work specifically night shifts affect the reproductive health of the workers in addition to the fatigue. Spontaneous abortion, pre term birth and lowered birth weight: these are some of the effects that are related to irregular hours of work. Night shift of work also affect the social and family life of workers that, most of the time, become reason of psychological stress often suffered by night shift workers.

Arvinder Kaur and Shivani Gupta (2012) in their article discussed the reason of joining the call centres specifically for women. They conducted a research in the call centre industry in Chandigarh city. Researchers found out that 34% of the respondents joined the call centre because of the easy entry without any experience requirement. Exciting work and environment attract another 33% of the respondents. Flexible working hours is the reason why 23% of the respondents joined call centre. 10% of the respondent said that their family's financial problems made them to join call centre industry. After joining the call centre workforce there are many issues that workers face. One of the main problems is the lack of socialization. Almost all respondents reported that they do not have time to spend with their family or friends because of irregular hours of work. 44% respondents reported that because of being a woman they are often denied promotion. When it comes to health issues of workers, 100% of respondents reported of headache, backache and stress.

Methodology: This paper is a descriptive study in nature. It is based on secondary information. The secondary data and information have been comprehensively analyzed for preparing this paper. The secondary information have been collected from different

scholars' and researchers' published books, articles published in different journals, conference paper, working paper and websites.

Women Workers at MNCs: Empowerment or Exploitation: It is very clear that there has been a steady growth of call centres in our region, providing white collar employment to women who would have found it difficult to obtain employment after a modest education. It has always been difficult for women to obtain higher education in our country because of the stereotypical roles assign to women. In the present context of women's education there are differences of opinion. One line of thinking is that women should be given education to play their traditional roles as wives and mothers. According to Promilla Kapur the traditional view of women's education was not to make women efficient and active unit in the process of socioeconomic and political development but to make them more capable of fulfilling their traditional roles in the society as wives and mothers. While another way of approach is to train them to face the challenges of modern life. Some thinks that women should be given higher education to seek employment. Because of modernization or the changing attitude of society towards women's education, many women get the opportunity to obtain higher education, but still they are very few in numbers. In this scenario, call centre employment help those women who could not make to higher education.

The call centre industry, because of its high wages and high tech work environment is viewed as a source of liberation for women. Outsourcing call centre jobs has had a significant effect on the social, cultural and economic empowerment of Indian women. Thousands of young, urban women, who generally would have been unemployed and married, are now making good money from call centre employment and are considered to be assets by their families. Because they are financially self-sufficient, these women are often confident and assertive in their outlook and career choice and reject traditional familial control over them. Call centre work means, especially for women, money, independence and an informal environment along with training in American accent. Because educated middle class women working in call centres are earning an income that far exceed what they could previously earn, so it is seen as a catalyst for empowering women. This new availability of jobs give women a sense of self confidence in which the lack behind before because of economic dependency. Now they are more independent economically, morally and it also enhanced their bargaining power at their work and in their family too.

According to Jaya Prakash Pradhan and Vinoj Abraham in their article "*Social and Cultural Impact of Outsourcing: Emerging Issues from Indian Call Centres*" call centres often prefer to hire women because they are seen as more hard working, patient, attentive and loyal and having better interpersonal skills than men. In contrast men consider more aggressive and combative, and in many cases, such jobs comes with higher salary. As a result of this, many scholars term such condition as the Feminization of Labor or more recently Feminization of Service. Because it is viewed that a part time, flexible work schedule that allows women to manage the household and still bring home an income, call

centre employment is considered a “pink collar” field, in which most employees are women and they are working with lower wages than that of men.

For women who join the industry, the relatively high wages and global work environment are viewed by some as a means to challenge patriarchal structures in the society. Scholar like J. P. Pradhan and V. Abraham in their article stated “In India’s patriarchal society, the emergence of call centres is nothing less than a social reform movement as far as economic, social, and cultural empowerment of women is concerned.” Call centre employment recodify the lives of women, who are employed in them. Now they are earning an amount, that satisfy their needs being women, so now there are chances that they can change power relation between men and women that are celebrated in our society, historically. They can become able to fight against inequality and exploitations. Furthermore, the night shift requirement of this industry, in combination with relatively high salary and an opportunity to work in a global environment, provide some women with a legitimate reason to get out of the house. This escape is garnered under the rubric of skill attainment, working in an office environment, or supporting the financial needs of the family. Many women, for instance, gained a sense of empowerment and liberation from earning their own money, going out at night and contributing in the family income. Beside these progresses, one should also consider that women experience expended physical and temporal mobility.

Participation in this industry gives some women a new form of independence because they are able to access night spaces in ways that were previously deemed off limits. Due to the time difference between India and America, one of the primary requirements for the employment in transnational call centres, beside fluency in English, is working the night shift. Typical night shift hours range from 10 pm to 6 am or 8pm to 4am. Because leaving home at night is generally considered inappropriate for Indian women, companies offer transportation as part of their recruitment strategy. Yet women workers are hampered by the assumption that they embody a space of vulnerability. As a result, women who break the rules about their spaces are viewed as they ask for violence, if they meet even rape, when they go out at night. The violence women worker face when they are out at night includes verbal harassment by male supervisors; rape, both inside and outside the industry; and the very real threat of assault and abduction.

Global night shift labor is intersecting with the lives of women in ironic and unsettling ways. Society relegates women who work in call centres to a low class status, and the industries where they work are sometimes referred to as warehouses and baby producing centres. This low status combined with working at night make women workers extremely vulnerable. They are perceived to be indecent women because they are out of place. For instance, in December 2003, a speaker at The 2003 Women in IT Conference in Chidambaram, India, has reported that one of her employee in Chennai called her company’s New York office in complete panic because the van used to transport employees at night had been pulled over by the police. Despite having identity cards, the women were accused of prostitution. The local government also provide little intervention or protection

to these workers. This is especially ironic because their labour serves as one of the primary contributor to foreign exchange income and is a key benefit to the government in form of economic development.

Besides providing a sense of self confidence, economic independence and physical mobility, there are some negative aspect of employment in call centres, such as health hazards. For a call centre women employee, it starts with stress and insomnia in the early stages and ultimately leads to premature graying of hair, hair loss and digestive diseases. Women employees also suffer from aches related to arms, hands and wrists due to continuous use of keyboard and mouse. Long hours of sitting and attending calls lead to back and shoulder pains as well. Furthermore, due to excessive exposure to computer screens and headphones (for a period of 8 to 10 hours per day), auditory and visionary problems also set in. Hearing damages and ear infections can also be caused due to continuous usage of headsets. At the same time the fact that call centre employees attend calls non-stop for the time they are at work, voice deficiency can also be accrued. People working night shifts face more difficult problems. By the time they adapt to shift timings, so the shift might change, and this change in shift timing also changes their sleep-awake cycle. This requires the body clock to adjust again, resulting in psychological and physical problems.

Moreover, while taking calls an employee is under a lot of pressure as so many people are observing the call- the voice trainer; the team leader or probably even an official of the company. This pressure on an employee leads to a stressful mind. Compilation of target within the time is other features of call centre work that may cause stress, which frequently results in employee “burnout”. For many women workers in call centres the daily experience is of retentive, intensive and stressful work. Brown (1999) more vividly, characterizes the work as “**repetitive brain strain**”.

On the other hand, the working conditions are exploitative in sense that working hours are long and income is not in proportion of hours of work. In addition, it is well known that such companies provide no guarantee of future employment. Women workers, who are employed in such MNC call centres, are working on risk. There is no guarantee of their future employment. It is also felt that job itself is not necessarily conducive. Attending phone calls after phone calls throughout the night is viewed as dulling the mind. It is also consider as a low skill job unless you rise to a senior position of handling teams, HR, customer service manager etc. which is most of the time impossible for women.

Another concern in relation to call centre employment is the identity issues. Women workers in transnational call centres, while speaking to their customers who are calling from another continent, have to change their names and accent so that their customers can talk without any hesitation and feel comfortable sharing their problems. On this issue a personal narrative documentary film “**Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night**” is made by Sunali Gulati. Film told from the perspective of an Indian living in the U.S., the film journeys into India's call centres where telemarketer's acquire American names and accents to service the

telephone support industry of the U.S. The film incorporates animation, live action, and archival footage to explore the complexities of globalization, capitalism, and identity.

This film also shows the hybridization of cultural, that call centre employees are structured within the ideology of capitalist expansion and neo colonialism. This system survives on complicity and subordination but so does the very existence and continuity of call centre employees who work within this ideology, accepting their cultural subordination as part of their jobs, resulting in the cultural transformation of urban Indian labor into a global proletariat. This view, according to Cohen and El-Sawad (2007) seems to suggest that a new western identity imposed on call centre employees which are not only at odds with their lives outside of work but which also amounts to them leading double lives.

The socio-cultural factors also work against the women who are employed in call centres in India. Even if the woman is happy and satisfied with her night duty job, and is getting an excellent remuneration for it, but her troubles may begin once she gets married. In many cases the women are forced to quit their jobs because of the disapproval of the husband and his family. However, the BPO industry is making an attempt to address this aspect as well. Zia Sheikh, the CEO of Infowavz International, a Mumbai based Call Centre says, “We try to reassure the relatives of our women employees by organizing Family Days on a regular basis.”

A major problem for women workers in call centre is to take out time for relationships. There is hardly any time for family and friends. The predominant reason is mismatch of timings. Call centres follow the calendar of the country they are servicing, so their holidays also come accordingly. It is normal for call centre employees not to celebrate festivals with their loved ones. This leads to problems at home. Stories of newly married couples, in which female partner works for a call centre, meeting only on weekends and that too if the call centre employee has an off day, are fairly common. In such a situation one definitely needs to ask, 'What is the future of their family?' Also, the displeasure, exasperation, monotony and frustration of the call centre employees affect their social life, which in turn affects their emotional self. ILO studied on the same subject and reported, “it appears to be well established that, from both the physiological point of view and the family and social point of view, night work is harmful to the large majority of workers”.

Conclusion and Suggestions: It turns out that a significant percentage of workers now employed in transnational call centres are female, but the social construction of women's role in society conflict with their participation in paid labor force. With the introduction of new opportunities of employment, most women's daily workload has only multiplied, because they have to do unpaid housework as before, in addition to paid work in BPO call centres. Because traditionally women are expected to manage home front, women who obtain employment in call centres, most of the time they are juggling with their responsibilities. As an employee they have to reach office at time, but at the same time they have to fulfill their responsibilities at home, and the scenario is worst if she is married. M. Hanumantha Rao in his article “*Employment of the Wife, and Husbands' Participation*

House-Work” attempted to understand the areas of house work in which the husbands of working women participated. He concludes, the specific sex-related division of labor does not appear to have change very much in the families of working women. There is a rigid demarcation of what woman’s work is and what man’s work is.

Safe transportation for women continues to remain a major challenge in the call centre industry. Because of several incidents of crimes against women call centre employees, many companies have tightened their safety policies. Company-sponsored pick-up and drop vehicles have been provided for women employees. Many companies’ rules include that women must travel only in the presence of another male employee. SMS services have been introduced to monitor the well-being of traveling employees. Adequate background checks on the designated cab drivers are also made by the employers. These measures have improved the situation considerably, though it still does not make the women employees feel 100% safe, especially when they work in night shifts. Employers should make some more practical measures to make women safe during the time of travel as well as during the working hours.

Since women are an integral part of this industry, the government can make it mandatory for companies to install GPS in cabs to have a stronger monitoring. Self-defense training to women, installing CCTVs at the workplace to prevent sexual harassment, police verification of cab drivers, security guards and peons working in BPOs, and efficient complaint system should be made compulsory for all employers.

After this discussion it became important that instead of viewing transnational call centres either as a site of western imperialism or a space that liberate women from traditional gender roles. One should begin to see that call centre employment has the potential to reshape individual perception of them and of the community that surrounds them. It is hoped that the information and analysis presented in this paper will help in extending the understanding of the links between the immediate experiences confronting women workers in call centres and the globalized processes that have influenced and shaped them.

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