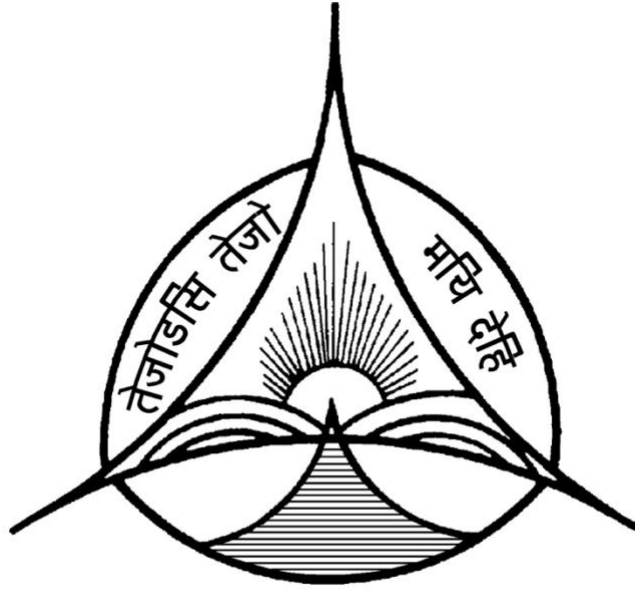


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**New Jobs and Old Norms?
Viewing Women's Work in India's Call Centres through a Gender Lens**

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I. Introduction

Despite a visible absence of reliable estimates, by now it is widely believed that the boom in employment in the Information Technology/Information Technology Enabled Services (IT/ITES) sector since the mid-1990s has led to increased employment opportunities for women in India. In the formative years of the sector, women's employment in the new service economy was construed as superior, with ample opportunities for empowerment. However, recent research and evidence questions this initial line of reasoning. Against this backdrop, this paper discusses the insecurities and vulnerabilities of women's employment in call centres, which is a major segment of the IT/ITES/BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) sector in India.

What are the gender implications of outsourced work in Indian call centres? Are these jobs really 'women-friendly' and 'stress-free'? What is the 'social health' of women's employment in this sunrise sector? Are the claims regarding 'empowerment' and agency of women valid? These are some of the crucial concerns/questions that will be addressed in the paper. The discussion draws on research conducted by the author on call centres dealing with labour issues in the National Capital Region (NCR) for the past 15 years. Due attention is also given to the findings of other available, field-based studies on call centres in India.

II. Women's Employment in Call Centres: Initial Expectations and Realities

Since the turn of the 21st century, call centres in India are perceived as important employment providers to educated women in urban areas, although there are no reliable statistics¹ on the quantum and pattern of women's employment in this new-economy job². The scope for increased avenues for women's employment in the sector, *prima facie*, raised considerable expectations. From the beginning, the 'women friendly' nature of jobs in call centres has been widely recognised, albeit based on stereotyped perceptions. It was often pointed out that due to a '*sweet voice, pleasing nature, patience and persistence to carry out repetitive work*', women are more

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suitable for the customer care work in call centres, especially when the interactions are voice-based. Accordingly, women's skills in negotiation, reconciliation and other abilities such as patience, attentiveness, care and empathy are considered as the positive factors which make them suitable for work in call centres.

Due to the techno-savvy and impressively profiled nature of work and workplace, it was also widely conceived that call centres provide avenues for stress-free and dignified work for educated women. Similarly, these modern workplaces are often construed as comparatively 'gender-equal' and, thus, 'progressive' in nature. Yet another expectation is the 'empowerment' potential of these new economy jobs³ by way of improving the role and position of women in the family, workplace, and in society as a whole. Notwithstanding these expectations, an increasing body of new research and evidence suggests that there are reasons to worry about women's employment and work in call centres (Remesh and Neetha 2004, 2008; Pandey and Singh 2005). Some of the issues concerning the insecurities and vulnerabilities of women's work in this modern service sector are discussed here. The discussions and analyses are mainly based on available empirical research on women's work in Indian call centres.

Before going into a detailed discussion of gender issues around women's work in call centres, it is important to note that call centres are not homogenous. There are considerable variations among call centres in terms of nature and timing of work, compensation packages, physical work conditions, clientele, customers and socio-economic profile of workers. As Remesh (2014) explains, the entry and spread of call centres in India occurred in two phases. The first phase, which started and gained momentum from the mid-1990s, was predominantly characterised by the advent and spread of 'transnational call centres'. During this phase, almost all call centre activities in India were part of the internationally outsourced service sector, where the medium of communication (be it voice-based or email/internet-based) was predominantly English.⁴ But, in the subsequent and present phase, which started around the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, there has been a visible growth in and spread of 'domestic call centres', where the employees primarily cater to customers from within the country, and the medium of communication is English/Hindi/regional languages to suit the requirements of local customers.⁵

The change in clientele, customer-base and medium of communication in the case of domestic call centres vis-à-vis their international counterparts itself has implications for the socio-

economic profile of the workforce engaged. For instance, when we consider the profile of women workers in transnational call centres, extant empirical evidence shows that they are largely unmarried, young women who are well educated and often technically trained. A substantial portion of these women leave their jobs at the time of engagement or marriage. Besides this, all these workers (male and female) are from urban areas—the ‘urban creamy layer’.⁶ But, when it comes to domestic call centres, the pattern of women’s participation is distinct in terms of class, social and regional profiles. Although women workers in these centres are also by and large unmarried, there is a significant presence of married women and women who are ‘not too young’ in the workforce. They are mostly from lower/lower-middle class and middle to lower layers of the social hierarchy. Further, while the women are mostly from urban areas, a considerable proportion of male workers are from smaller towns. It is also found that while the domestic call centres offer quicker upward job-mobility for males, within and across firms, women workers normally stagnate in the lower rungs.⁷

III. Gender Inequalities in Distribution of Employment Gains

The available empirical evidence and industry estimates suggest that women’s share in employment in transnational call centre work ranges between 40–45 per cent, whereas in the domestic segment women have a slender majority (approximately 50–55 per cent). There are also studies that suggest an even higher proportion of male workers (50–70 per cent) in call centres (Patel2010; Mirchandani2013, Basi2009). All these indicate that, contrary to expectations in the initial phase of the advent and spread of call centres in India, women do not have a strikingly higher share of employment-in-both transnational and domestic call centres.

The relatively smaller share of women in transnational call centres is contrary to the global pattern of feminisation and ‘pinkening’ of call centre work. While globally women’s share in call centre jobs is as high as 70 per cent and above, it is a major concern that this pattern is not observed in India. There are two possible factors that restricted large scale participation of women in this relatively high-income occupation. The first is the issue of getting the ‘required’ familial and social approval for working night shifts, which is more or less a pre-requisite in transnational call centres. Due to restrictive social norms prevalent in a largely patriarchal society, being out at night is not considered proper for women from good families. Women’s participation in night work is even considered an intrusion into male-spaces. Women who choose

to work in call centres have to undergo a series of negotiation processes (explicit and implicit) within households and society to participate in this atypical new work in the service sector. While many of them failed to get approval from their families to participate in this new work, others only got 'temporary' approval, till the time they were engaged or married. A few women, who dared to challenge these familial/societal restrictions, had to face a great deal of tension stemming from the social-inertia vis-à-vis women's presence and work in night-spaces. The second reason for the relatively lower share of women (or, as a corollary, higher share of men) is the higher pay in employment in transnational call centres.⁸ As Patel (2010) observes, the barriers posed by night work for women's participation and the high wages in call centres together led to a situation that facilitated higher levels of men's participation in jobs in this new economy.

Coming to the qualitative aspects of call centre work, *prima facie*, the profile of women's employment appears to be brighter with better salary packages, equal payment for men and women, and higher levels of autonomy and freedom. Also, call centres have been praised for providing ample opportunities for women to acquire new skills (soft skills like communication, listening, inter-personal skills, domain expertise, and so on). However, in reality, most of these expectations do not hold. By now, it is widely understood that women workers in call centres (both in international and domestic sectors) are predominantly engaged in low-end and low-paying jobs at the bottom rungs. In many cases, they are even working on 'part-time' contracts, which is a pernicious practice that has recently emerged. Compared to their male counterparts, women have less scope for career progression. Although the call centres are generally viewed as 'career less' for both men and women, it is more so for women, given their abysmally lower share in the managerial and supervisory cadres and strikingly higher share in low-end jobs. Most of these are 'dead-end' jobs as there is little scope for most of the women workers to move beyond one or two promotions. While the domestic call centres have very little scope for women to move up the career-ladder, the transnational centres provide women more chances for upward mobility. Even then, only a minority of women actively build a managerial career in the international call centres. Women employees often prefer to continue in lower-end jobs as they are better able to balance their work and family lives. Apart from institutional preferences, the overall patriarchal values prevalent in Indian societies also prompt women to arrive at such decisions. Thus, with women workers largely confined to low-end, low-skilled and highly

mundane jobs, the Indian call centre scenario is also supportive of the 'female ghetto' thesis, as explained by Belt (2002) in the Western as well as global contexts.

Gender discrimination is also evident while allocating roles, responsibilities and assignments in these modern workplaces. Less scope for skill enhancement is another aspect that is more acute and severe in the case of women workers as compared to male workers. In addition, women workers face more stress at work than men, which often makes it impossible for them to continue to work after marriage, and especially during and after pregnancy. The higher rate of attrition of women workers vis-à-vis their male counterparts substantiates this. Women are also more vulnerable at the workplace in terms of physical safety, sexual harassment at the workplace, health issues, and so on. Thus, on the whole, it can be concluded that both quantitatively and qualitatively, women's employment in call centres is not in any way superior, quite contrary to the perceived employment benefits from this so-called 'women friendly' sector in the new economy.

IV. Empowerment, Freedom and Agency

Despite their engagement in low-paid jobs which do not significantly contribute to the family income, there are many other societal implications in call centre work. By providing an opportunity for women to participate in the global labour market, these jobs help in altering gendered relationships within the society and household (Basi 2009).

Often, work outside the home enhances women's 'agency'⁹ within households. As Patel (2010) reports, many of the women workers in call centres gain a sense of empowerment and liberation as a result of earning higher incomes and entry into the night space. Working night shifts give women a valid reason to step out of their homes (thus providing a sense of freedom), and economic empowerment adds to their agency within the households. With higher salaries, changed status and freedom to move freely in the time-space, women are asserting their preferences in many familial decisions directly concerning them, including deferring marriages, exercising choice while selecting life-partners, independently taking decisions about their professions (such as the decision to live away from the family; work abroad; continue/discontinue working). Often, enhanced participation of women in the decision making process (concerning them and their family) leads to tensions within households. Most of the field

studies on women in call centres report the everyday negotiations of these 'newly empowered' women—be it convincing parents or dealing with the inferiority complex of husbands.

How far are these agency gains sustainable? This is an important concern. Quite often, the empowerment stories end at the point of marriage, engagement or job loss, and the women eventually return to the old familial norms which once again bring them back to the world of parental control, arranged marriage, and the regimes of surveillance and control.

V. Night Work and Balancing of Work and Family

Most of the call centres (almost all in the transnational segment and some in the domestic sector) are characterised by non-standard timing of work, which normally include night work or work during odd hours. Such unusual patterns of work-time are found adding responsibilities and costs for the firms that engage women workers (in terms of provision of physical safety measures, transportation, arrangement for rest room facilities, and so on). As these special requirements are often linked to provisions of existing labour legislations, it is not easy for the firms to ignore them. For this reason, many firms prefer not to recruit women, especially those firms with little resources. Thus, night shifts and odd hours of work act as entry barriers to women in call centre jobs.

During interviews done¹⁰ by the author in the National Capital Region (NCR), many HR professionals and managerial staff categorically rejected the possibility of recruiting women workers with typical responses as: *'If we recruit men, we need not bother about transport arrangements, harassment'*. Furthermore, incidents such as the 2005 rape and murder of a woman call centre employee in Bangalore, where the management of the firm was held responsible for not providing adequate safety to women employees, *inter alia*, discouraged the firms from recruiting women so as to circumvent their liabilities as per the provisions of the enabling legislations.

The atypical nature and time of work (especially the night shifts) in call centres also have its implications in a patriarchal society, where working in night shifts is not normally meant for 'respectable' women. Accordingly, female workers in call centres become 'trespassers into male-spaces', as only sex-workers and bar dancers are expected to be present in night-spaces. In such a situation, women have to continuously negotiate with 'mobility-morality' norms in a patriarchal

society which tends to blindly stigmatise women who disrupt social expectations (Basi 2009; Patel 2010). In such a society, women's entry into night spaces is viewed as undesirable. Accordingly, 'call centre jobs are even equated with call girl jobs' (Patel 2010:142). Citing the response of an 'outsourcing consultant' (who was determined not to send any of his family members to work in call centres as they are 'zones of abortion activity'!), Krishnamurthy (2018: 107) explains that even those who have adequate exposure to global jobs in the new economy tend to demarcate women's avenues for work and spaces of interaction based on gendered notions that are framed by orthodox societal norms.

Call centre work also implies continued conflicts between work timings/demands and family responsibilities. Women workers have a double disadvantage in entering these new work spaces. On the one hand, in patriarchal family set ups, the onus of running the household smoothly (domestic chores of cooking, care-giving, and so on) continues to rest with women, regardless of whether or not they are working. Even after their entry into call centre work, most of these women workers continue to shoulder a large proportion of the household responsibilities, sometimes sharing them with other women members in the household or hired domestic help. At the same time, familial responsibilities were given least consideration at the workplace. '*You have to prioritise between career and family*' is a typical response from the management, as testified by many women respondents. Accordingly, women were not exempted from the tight controls and monitoring followed in these new workspaces. Notwithstanding this, Basi (2009) observes that 'the technocratic nature and controls at call centres were preferred by many women workers against the discriminations they had experienced in other avenues of employment'.

Despite having entered a workplace which is part of the new economy and part of a technologically superior environment, the families and social groups of the women workers still operate within the norms and ethos of traditional/patriarchal societies where 'respectable femininity' is largely attached to domesticity. Accordingly, a woman who takes care of family requirements, with or without participating in the labour market, are rated better than working women who do not adhere to their expected familial roles, such as cooking, home making and care giving. Thus, even new economy jobs are not free from the age-old traditional framework, thereby exhibiting a continuation of gendered division of household labour.

Negotiating power relations and seeking equality within the family system were reported as difficult tasks by women who are otherwise 'empowered' in their workplaces. Such socially 'undesirable' acts, along with breaking the male-breadwinner ideology, often contributed to the disintegration of their families. In such a situation, women quite often tend to compromise their own career aspirations and prioritise 'family roles'. The pattern of attrition of women workers in call centres, with a good proportion of them leaving their jobs after a few years (to enter into 'traditionally' preferred jobs or higher studies), reconfirms that societal and familial compulsions govern women's work in call centres.

VI. Women's Dilemmas in Customer-oriented Service

Call centres are workplaces which are highly influenced by the ethos of customer-oriented service. Irrespective of the nature of work (voice-based or email-based), the presence and intervention of the customer into the workplace (albeit virtually) is a defining feature of call centres. Accordingly, there is also a great deal of emotional tension experienced by the workers, due to the virtual reign of 'customer sovereignty'¹¹ at the workplace. In such a situation, the norms followed at the workplace always expect and demand that the workers be courteous and accommodative to the customers, even if they are rude and harsh in their interaction. As a result, women workers in call centres often fall prey to sexualised and eroticised responses from customers (both Western and Indian).

Discussions with call centre employees suggest that these workplaces often provide scope for free play of everyday sexism, which is completely immune from legislative and judicial protection. In the absence of regulatory mechanisms and prohibitive laws (both nationally and internationally), customers can easily get away with this, especially when the abuse is over telephone and from distant locations (even across country borders).

The general absence of managerial support in such instances is also widely reported by women employees. *'When the abuse is from a fellow-employee, the management will help, whereas when it is from a customer, the advice will be to ignore'*. These words by a woman employee were echoed by many others.

All this prompts women workers to design suitable coping mechanisms, often on their own, and at times with the help of fellow employees, team leaders and management. Peer group support,

contemplating retorts to customers and retaliation from outside the boundaries of the 'workplace' are reported as coping strategies by many women workers. Some workers also shared instances of careful division of labour to avoid customer abuse. In such cases, women's interactions with the customers are restricted to a 'bearable' level and the face-to-face interactions (if any) are strictly earmarked for male employees.

VII. Conclusion

On the whole, the foregoing discussion suggests that notwithstanding the 'gender empowering' image of new economy occupations, quite often, these jobs are found to exacerbate existing gender and social inequalities. It has shown that gender-based stereotyping and division of labour in this sector is even comparable to the pattern in traditional workplaces.

It is also evident that even the workplaces governed by new paradigms of production organisation and enabled by information technology are not essentially free from gender stereotypes and unequal gender relations. Mere participation in a modern sector occupation alone does not necessarily lead to empowerment or emancipation of women from the clutches of traditionally rooted social norms. On the contrary, even such occupations are built on the traditional structures of gendered divisions, reinforcing the marginalisation of women in the labour market.

It can be concluded that employment in call centres is not as 'women friendly' and 'gender neutral' as was expected in the formative years of the sector, and that there exists a sharp 'gender divide' in the distribution of employment gains in the new economy. It is also evident from the discussion that women are disadvantageously placed in the sector in terms of quality and strength of employment. All these establish beyond doubt that despite the images of 'empowering' and 'modern' jobs, women in new economy occupations continue to operate within the narrow paradigms, which are (re)constituted by gendered constructs.

Notes:

¹The NSSO rounds still do not provide sufficient disaggregate data to understand women's employment in various segments of the IT/ITES sector. While NASSCOM provides some broad data on employment in general, and at times on women's employment in call centres, these estimates are unreliable as there are no details about the

methodology engaged. Also, one cannot see any continuity in concepts and categories engaged by NASSCOM while providing the employment data.

²New economy jobs' is a broader term used to denote the recently emerged occupations in the service sector, including those in the IT/ITES sector, new banking and financial sector, retail business, and so on.

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⁴For a detailed discussion on transnational call centres, see Remesh (2004).

⁵For a detailed account of the work and workers in domestic call centres, see Remesh (2010).

⁶For a detailed account of women's employment in international call centres, see Remesh and Neetha (2004).

⁷Remesh and Neetha (2008) discusses the gender dimensions of employment in domestic call centres in a detailed manner.

⁸The relatively higher share of women workers in domestic call centres also supports this argument of positive correlation with high-income jobs and men's employment (or, alternatively, positive correlation with low-paid jobs and women's employment).

⁹'Agency of women' is the ability of women to make choices based on their endowments and the capacity to follow these choices. It is also a concept closely related to the empowerment of women. Agency is a core idea that Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum engaged with while conceptualising the capability-approach. For further details, see Keleher (2014).

¹⁰Interviews of 60 agents working in call centres were carried out by the present author. Of these, 22 were women. Supplementary information was gathered from 10 key resource persons, including HR managers, consultants and recruitment agents.

¹¹'Customer sovereignty' is an improvised term derived from 'consumer sovereignty', an economic concept, which highlights the importance attached to customers in economic decisions concerning firms and markets. According to 'consumer sovereignty' principle, consumer is considered as 'the king' and all decisions are based on customer preferences or demand. In call centres too, due to customer-oriented nature, a great deal of importance is attached to customer-preferences. Hence, one could see the prevalence of a sense of 'customer-sovereignty' in these modern workplaces.

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