

GENDER MATTERS
IN THE CALL CENTER INDUSTRY:
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE EFFECTS
OF CALL CENTER WORK ON WOMEN

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Abstract

The dramatic increase in call center jobs has spawned numerous research about this industry and its effects on workers around the world. This review of literature covers some of these works and examines whether the gender-differentiated impact of call center work has been adequately explored. While men and women may be similarly exposed to the same stressful working environment and demanding work load, the effects are not necessarily the same. Earlier studies parenthetically cite specific effects of call center work on women such as health problems of pregnant and lactating mothers, safety concerns of women working at night, as well as conflicts between working hours and the demands of task performance and domestic and family responsibilities. A highly stressful job, coupled with graveyard shifts and unpredictable schedules, can have significant effects on women's traditional caring roles at home as well as on the gender division of labor within the household.

INTRODUCTION

ON DECEMBER 4, 2010, THE CONTACT CENTER ASSOCIATION OF THE PHILIPPINES proudly announced that that Philippines has become the call center of the world, with around 350,000 Filipinos working in call centers, against India's 330,000 workforce (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2010). The same news article also reported that according to IBM's Global Locations Trend Annual Report, the Philippines has overtaken India as the world leader in business support functions

like shares services and business process outsourcing. The IBM report said that unlike India's BPO hot spots, labor costs in the country have not increased as much.

The Philippine call center and business process outsourcing (BPO) industry is a major source of employment in the country and one of the largest sources of revenues (Boal & Sale 2010). Employment in the BPO sector has grown considerably and reached its peak in 2003. In 2008, outsourced work provided 237,175 jobs, and this industry was worth an estimated USD3.3 billion in revenues, which was about three percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Amante 2008).

The dramatic increase in BPO and call center jobs has spawned numerous research about this industry and its effects on workers around the world (see for instance Bain et al. 2002; Taylor and Bain 2005; Pico 2006; Deery et al. 2010). This review of literature examines whether, among the growing literature on the effects of working in call centers, the gender differentiated impact of BPO work has been adequately explored. While men and women may be similarly exposed to the same stressful working environment and demanding work load, the effects are not necessarily the same. The structural inequalities between women and men and the gender division of labor tends to place a higher burden on working women since they are in charge of unpaid and undervalued reproductive work to maintain and sustain their families (Pineda Ofreneo 2005). Hence, this study reviews the existing literature on the effects of call center work on workers, focusing on women workers' experiences and the effects on them of call center work.

This area of study is important considering that women make up the majority of call center workers (Belt et al. 2002). In the Philippines, almost sixty percent of workers in the call centers are women (NSO-GDC 2009). According to Cabrera-Balleza (2005), BPO is currently the single largest technology-enabled employer of women.

This article is divided into five parts: "Call Centers and BPO's: an overview"; "Global outsourcing and the continuing feminization of labor"; "Robotic efficiency and other labor concerns: studies on the effects of working in call centers"; "Gender matters in

the workplace: studies on the effects of call center work on women” and; “Recommendations.”

The over-all intention of this study is to contribute to earlier works (see for example, Belt et al. 2002; Patel 2010) that aim to provide a gender dimension to research on global call centers.

CALL CENTERS AND BPO'S: AN OVERVIEW

Call centers and BPOs are segments of a large sub-sector, the information technology-enabled services (IT-ES). The globalized capitalism of today is fueled by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Transnational corporations (TNCs) are now able to operate with great efficiency and reap unprecedented profits because ICTs make it possible for them to conduct business anywhere without the boundaries of time and space (Cabrera-Balleza 2005). ICT advances, principally in broadbanding, have made possible and profitable the global outsourcing of back-office business solutions, programming services and customer assistance to TNCs and their clients in North America, Europe and elsewhere on a 7-24 basis (Amante 2008).

The most common forms of outsourcing of operations are information technology outsourcing (ITO) and business process outsourcing (BPO). BPO encompasses call center outsourcing, human resource outsourcing, finance and accounting outsourcing and claims processing outsourcing (San Jose 2007). The BPO industry has “non-voice” and “voice” sectors. The non-voice includes data encoding, database development, market research, handling of credit and billing problems, loan processing, account management, data search, architectural blueprints, and other business-related activities (Ofreneo et al. 2007).

The focus of this study is on the “voice” sector, more commonly known as call center. However, since many of the earlier studies use BPO and call center interchangeably, or use BPO in a broad sense when describing the working conditions of workers, the term “BPO” may sometimes be used to denote “call center.”

The voice sector is often interchangeably referred to as the “call center industry,” “contact center industry” or “customer service

industry” because the service entails interactive communication with the clients or customers (Ofreño et al. 2007). A call center is generally a customer-interactive office set-up consisting of computers hooked up to the internet and manned by accent neutralized or product trained operators who respond to inquiries or complaints from callers or customers calling from countries where a particular product or service is being marketed, produced and/or sold (San Jose 2007). Because of the time difference, customers in North America and Europe are serviced by call operators of Asia, mainly from India and the Philippines, logging in for work at night.

The birth of the call center/BPO industry was closely associated with the advent of ICT-enabled services such as data encoding, customer service, and business process outsourcing to countries such as the Philippines, India and China (San Jose 2007). According to San Jose, outsourcing was an effort to exploit segments of the labor market within the developed countries where wages were lower, to increase profit. Eventually, with the integration of economies brought about by globalization, outsourcing or off-shoring has become a means to exploit the global reserve army, especially in the developing countries such as India. In a broad sense, outsourcing is the relocation of business processes from one country to another, which includes key business processes such as production, or services, where there is a significant reduction in labor costs (Amante 2008). As described by San Jose (2007), global outsourcing, or off-shoring, is engaging in international division of labor so as to tap the comparative advantages that locations or countries have, in terms of the cheapest sources of quality labor, technology, market access, and other value added of doing business.

Companies in developed countries benefit immensely from this set-up. According to Palatino (2009), by taking advantage of highly-skilled and low-value labor in poorer economies such as ours, foreign firms gain an estimated net savings of 20-40 percent on labor costs. Citing a 2004 study, Pineda-Ofreño (2005) remarked that foreign companies save a lot by transferring jobs to the Philippines because of the wage differential – whereas the average call center employee in the U.S. gets USD4,000 a month, in the Philippines, the rate ranges from USD300 to 400. On the other hand, Palatino

(2009) claimed that the average annual salary of a call center agent in the Philippines is USD3,964, which is lower than Thailand's USD4,874, Malaysia's USD5,199 and Singapore's USD16,884.

In other words, the driving force behind global outsourcing is massive cost reduction. Almost in every case, work is off-shored in order to significantly reduce labor expenses (San Jose 2007), cut costs and maximize profits (Taylor and Bain 2005). In reality, foreign companies are exploiting our cheap labor. That the Philippines is said to have overtaken India in the BPO industry has a direct correlation to the fact that labor costs in the country has not increased significantly (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2010).

It is important to emphasize this in order to have a better appreciation of the over-all situation of the call center workers. The growth of the call center industry was brought about by the same forces that transformed economies into ever-expanding markets which transcend national boundaries, all in the name of profit. The off-shoring of business functions is merely a continuation of the internationalization of the division of labor, whereby the less developed countries (or the economic South) supply the advanced industrial countries, or the transnational corporations, with cheap labor.

In the Philippines, employment in the BPO sector has grown considerably and reached its peak in 2003. In 2008, outsourced work provided 237,175 jobs, and this industry was worth an estimated USD3.3 billion in revenues, which was about three percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Amante 2008). Data provided by Kabataan Party List Representative Raymond Palatino (2009), on the other hand, shows that the number of jobs generated by the call center industry grew from 99,000 workers in 2004 to 372,000 workers in 2008, most of them in their 20's. In terms of revenues, from USD350 million in 2001, Palatino said that revenues generated from the BPO sector surged to USD6 billion in 2008.

A study by Sibal et al. (2006) has shown that the call center company employs sixty percent more female regular employees than male. In 2005, call center industries on the average employed 379 women workers per establishment. Pineda Ofreneo (2005) also observed that the call center, the fastest growing sub-sector of the

service industry, has in recent years generated many “high value” but short term jobs for young, English-speaking Filipino women who work night shifts at great expense to their health, family and social life.

GLOBAL OUTSOURCING AND THE CONTINUING FEMINIZATION OF LABOR

Research on call centers in Ireland, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom has indicated that women make up the majority of call center workers (Belt et al. 2002). This is consistent with the trend in Philippine call centers (see Cabrera-Balleza 2005 and Pineda Ofreneo 2005). This trend continues what has been referred to as the “worldwide feminization of the labor force and employment” (Pineda-Ofreneo 2005 citing ILO 2004 World Commission Report).

Belt et al. (2002) examined the relationship between the feminization of the labor market and the demand for stereotypical feminine qualities and social skills in service-based economy, specifically in call centers. Observing that the general shift from manufacturing towards the services in recent years was accompanied by a considerable increase in women participating in the labor market, they cited the observations of a number of authors (Belt et al. citing Adkins 1995; McDowell 1998; Woodfield 1998; Bradley et al. 2000), that female labor power is increasingly in demand in part because women are believed to naturally possess in abundance many of the social skills required by employers in service-based economy, especially in the so-called “interactive service occupations,” in which the central emphasis is upon face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with people. They posited that call centers are good sites in which to explore questions on how “feminine” social skills are being used by employers in the service industries, and to what extent these skills are valued, acknowledged and rewarded. This is so not only because women make up the majority of employees in the industry, but also because it has been claimed by employers that women are more suited to the work than men because they are more likely to possess the appropriate social skills, particularly the ability to “smile down

the phone.”

After conducting research in 13 call centers in three European countries – Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK – the study concluded that “feminine” social skills do play a central role in call center work, and that as a consequence, women are deemed to be particularly suited to it. At the same time, however, the study showed that:

At the same time, however, we have shown that women are also recruited to call centre work because they are perceived to be more capable of dealing with the monotony of the work and the regimented work environment. The highly standardized and controlled nature of work and organisation used in call centres constrains the extent to which women’s social skills can be used and further enhanced. Further, women are also most heavily concentrated in those areas of call centre work, particularly in customer service roles, that attract the lowest financial rewards (Belt et al. 2002, 32).

It appears that gendered assumptions about the abilities of women as compared to men come into play in their suitability as call center employees, and these gendered assumptions or stereotypes work in two different ways: as skilled workers who possess communication skills (bubbly or lively personalities, natural ability to talk or to build rapport with customers, caring attitude, ability to carry out emotional labor) and people skills (sociability, ability to motivate people), on the one hand, and as workers suited to the repetitive, monotonous, and highly pressurized work that characterizes call centers, on the other hand.

The gendered assumptions in the abilities of women are also echoed in Sibal et. al’s 2006 study about globalization and changes in work conditions in the Philippines. Observing that there is a slight gender segmentation in the call center company, the authors remarked:

As a service oriented company whose main function is to communicate with clients, women are more effective. The

figures reflect the statistics of NSCB (National Statistical Coordination Board) which show that services sector has more females than males, while the manufacturing sector has more males than females (29).

Considering that the stereotypical images of women may be an underlying factor in the increase of women's employment in call sectors, it may also be important for future research to examine whether BPO employment constitutes gender-responsive participation of women in the IT industry.

Beneria (2003) also examined the impact of feminization of the labor force on traditions and gender constructions. Citing the cases of the Caribbean and some countries such as China, India, Malaysia, and the Philippines, she stated that expanding services associated with global markets tend to employ low skilled women in *pink collar offices*, for example for data entry and data processing in mail order business, airlines and rail systems, credit card providers, and other financial services like banking and insurance. She quoted Carla Freeman (2000), who wrote that the case of Barbados offshore clerical work resulted in "a convergence between realms of tradition and modernity, gender and class – where transnational capital and production, the Barbadian state, and young Afro-Caribbean women together fashion a new 'classification' of women worker who, gendered producer and consumer, is fully enmeshed in global and local, economic and cultural processes" (Freeman in Beneria 2003, 80).

To be sure, Beneria was not the first to problematize the interconnections between gender relations and the global feminization of labor. The impact of globalization on the lives of working women has been a common subject of research in the past years (see for example, Illo and Pineda Ofreneo 2002; Pineda Ofreneo and David 2005; Lu 2008 and 2009). Lu (2008) has posited that the accommodation of women into the labor force in the new industrial organization was not sufficient to establish a better position for women in society. The new development led to an increase in the number of women in the labor force, but the impact on their quality of life and decision-making processes is still to be

felt (Palmer in Lu 2008).

Women carry with them their subordinate status in the home to the workplace, and this comes to define their status in the workplace. In fact, the increasing participation of women in the labor force is seen as the increasing double burden of both paid work and homework (Lu 2008, 7).

These studies, however, focus primarily on women workers in the manufacturing, export processing zones, agricultural and informal sectors, as well as on migrant women. Those that touch upon the effects of IT on women (Cabrera-Balleza 2005; Lu 2008 and 2009) do not elaborate on the effects or gendered impact of call center work on women and the implications of such work on gender relations and gender division of labor. To date, there have been no in-depth studies conducted about the effects of call centers jobs on the gender relations and gender division of household labor, and on the reproductive role of women, despite the fact that BPO jobs have increased exponentially and that majority of these jobs are occupied by women. Moreover, the nature of work, working conditions, and the over-all set-up in a call center is significantly different from other industries, which necessitates a closer look at the call center industry.

ROBOTIC EFFICIENCY AND OTHER LABOR CONCERNS: STUDIES ON THE EFFECTS OF WORKING IN CALL CENTERS

The growing literature on the effects of working in call centers are generally gender-blind, that is, women and men are perceived to be similarly affected by the working conditions and over-all set-up in call centers (see for instance, Pico 2006; Deery et al. 2010; Dizon and Gregorio 2010).

One of the most mentioned effects of call center work is excessive stress. With a few exceptions (see for example, Taylor and Bain 2005; Ofreneo et al. 2007; Asuncion 2008), studies mentioning this problem do not differentiate the effects between women and men. A research conducted in a large telecommunications company in Australia, for instance, revealed that call center

employees experienced considerable job strain (Deery et al. 2010). Customer queries and complaints tended to peak after invoices were dispatched and special offers on telephonic and internet products often coincided with higher call volumes. Moreover, the company's range of products and services changed rapidly, pricing policies were regularly revised and information systems were constantly upgraded. New information had to be read and absorbed rapidly to ensure a high standard of customer service.

Similarly, investigation on Indian call center labor process by Taylor and Bain (2005) revealed that agents experienced pressure due to extreme monitoring of their performance. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) based on contracts between third-party providers and clients prescribe quantitative measures (including call volumes, abandonment rates, call-handling times) and specific qualitative criteria. Both forms are strictly enforced in India - for example, contractual requirements dictate that agents adhere rigidly to scripts. Agents experience this as demanding, pressurized and frequently stressful.

Pico (2006) has also earlier asserted that the monitoring for high service quality coupled with the pressure to attain high output targets have been identified as source of stress and high levels of dissatisfaction among employees.

While women and men workers may be similarly affected by the same stringent monitoring, it is important to note here Belt et al.'s observation that the work was least routinized, and monitoring and control practices least stringently used in the technical support roles in the computer services call centers, where males made up majority of employees. Besides, women tend to be doubly affected by stress due to her other burdens at home.

Taylor and Bain (2005) also cite temperature and environmental conditions among the concerns of call center workers. Buildings are sealed and temperature, air conditioning and humidity are controlled. This same situation is experienced by Filipino call center workers. Ofreneo et al. (2007) described the weather conditions in the call center as "very cold inside but hot outside," adding that this deadly combination produces all kinds of health and safety problems, such as voice problems (dry, itchy

throat, hoarseness, clearing of throat, cracking of voice, choking, burning sensation, loss of voice, cough, cold, etc.). They added other health problems such as eye strain due to lighting situation and uninterrupted use of computers for long hours (computer vision syndrome), hearing problems, neck/shoulder/back/wrist problems (varied musculoskeletal symptoms due to physical arrangements within the limited 1½ x 1½ meter cubicle), and mental and psychological stress.

Another concern raised by call center workers is the “preponderance of abusive and irritating customers” (Pico 2006), which aggravates the already stressful environment. These workers are required to be civil with their customers, many of whom tend to be abusive or even hysterical (Ng in Pico 2006).

Research have also shown that the nature of work organization in call centers tend to constrain skill development. The very purpose of establishing a call center is to create an environment where work can be standardized to create relatively uniform and repetitious activities so as to achieve economies of scale and consistent quality customer service (Belt et al. in Pico 2006). Belt et al.’s (2002) findings indicate overwhelmingly that the nature of work organization used in call centers acts to constrain skill development, due primarily to the predominance of uniform tasks.

Bool and Sale (2010) cited reports that in call centers and BPOs, employers communicated with staff chiefly via team meetings, e-mail, bulletin board, intranet, and internal paper mail or different combinations thereof. This type of communication is primarily designed to inform, not to consult. The mere giving of information, which is initiated and managed from top down, typifies participation that is low on empowerment and narrow in scope (Grindle and Cohen et al. in Bool & Sale 2010).

Pico (2006) also asserted that working at night and sleeping at day time would normally lessen their opportunities for social interaction and be more limited to the social environment in the call center which is mainly composed of co-workers who may follow the same routines. The combination of night-time work and constant schedule change takes its toll on agents’ health, social and family life. Manegdeg (2007) also found that 57 out of 100 respondents from

three call center companies disclosed that they can no longer spend time with their families like they used to.

Recently, Dizon and Gregorio (2010) did an exploratory study on the well-being of single young adults, males and females alike, working as call center agents. The respondents were single college graduates belonging to the age bracket 20-26. The results of the survey and follow-up interview show that the well being of single young adults working as call center agents are basically satisfactory. The study also showed that time constraints from the job did not affect the family relations of the respondents. Work was not seen as a stressor in the family relations. This is not consistent with earlier studies showing that the combination of night time work and constant schedule change takes its toll on agents' family life. Pico (2006), for instance, asserted that working at night and sleeping at day time would normally lessen their opportunities for social interaction and be more limited to the social environment in the call center which is mainly composed of co-workers who may follow the same routines. The combination of night-time work and constant schedule change takes its toll on agents' health, social and family life.

However, it must be pointed out that the focus of Dizon and Gregorio's study were single young adults who may have lesser or no domestic obligations. As the researchers explained, single young adults are typically shown to be able to adapt easily and relate to their work. Besides, the data was primarily based on surveys of 100 (50 single males, 50 single females) call center workers in Quezon City, which was carried out by distributing questionnaires to agents who fit the criteria (single and between 20 to 26 years old).

The respondents may or may not have answered the questionnaires carefully and meticulously, considering that according to the researchers, they distributed the questionnaires to those who frequent establishments such as mini-stop. Out of those who returned the questionnaires, the researchers chose 15 males and 15 females for follow-up interview. The questions centered on the perception of the employees regarding their physical well-being, leisure, spiritual, financial, peer and intimacy, family, work, mental health. The data collected may be enriched by more in-depth

interviews and prolonged observations on the day to day lives of the workers, both at home and in the workplace, to have a clearer understanding of the factors that contribute to their well-being.

More important to highlight is the study's findings that well-being score for each dimension does not differ whether the respondent is male or female. The researchers concluded that gender is not a factor in achieving well-being. It may be true that there was no significant difference in the perception of well-being between females and males, plausibly due to the fact that the respondents were young college graduates with relatively lesser or no reproductive obligations. The result may not be the same in case of married men and married women, or even to solo parents or single mothers. Moreover, it may also be important to explore the researchers' findings that many of the respondents were breadwinners, and that majority of them were still living with their parents. Does this mean that their household obligations or needs are being taken care of by their families? Do they have complete freedom to decide on matters such as how to spend their money, where to go after their work, or how to spend their free times?

All in all, majority of the above-cited literature on the effects of working in call center have not fully scrutinized the gendered impact of BPO work on women.

GENDER MATTERS IN THE WORKPLACE: STUDIES ON THE EFFECTS OF CALL CENTER WORK ON WOMEN

The question regarding the gender-differentiated effect of call center work on women is by no means new. Taylor and Bain (2005) mentioned that women, who constitute half the workforce, are particularly affected by conflicts between working hours and the demands of task performance, and domestic, family and social responsibilities and expectations. Ofreneo et al. (2007) cited the findings of the Occupational Health and Safety Center (OHSC) under the Department of Labor and Employment, which singled out the health and safety problems facing women employees in the CC-BPO industry, especially the solo parents, the pregnant women, and the lactating mothers. Asuncion (2008), commenting on an

earlier study which stated that civil status does not affect a call center agent's commitment to work and willingness to stay (Manegdeg 2007), pointed out that the more important issue is whether this finding reflects reality. She revealed that in her interview with a human resource manager and a human rights specialist, respectively, of two BPO companies, they admitted that married women usually resign from their company after reporting for work for a few weeks due to the demands of work at home and in the company. Asuncion surmised that a highly stressful job, coupled with graveyard shifts would prove to be too much to married women especially if they have children to attend to and they are still in their child bearing years.

However, these studies mentioned these concerns merely in passing, usually in a one-sentence or one-paragraph statement, and mostly in generalized statements that lack any specific factual basis. To date, no in-depth study has been conducted on the actual experiences of women BPO workers and the interconnections between their work and their traditional domestic or family obligations.

In a paper presented to the UP Department of Women and Development Studies, Aldea et al. (n.d.) looked into the women-related issues and challenges in the call center industry. The paper used four case studies and interviews on women who were currently working or who used to work as agents, team leader, or manager in call centers. The interviews provide an insight on the actual experiences of the women workers, and their narration, in the "I" story format, is a welcome development for the enrichment of the growing body of research on women's lived realities. The detailed narration of the women regarding the effects on them of working in BPO and their working experiences in general provided a gender dimension to research on global call centers. However, the paper did not delve deeper into how these experiences can be viewed in relation to the social constructions of gender and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities and expectations to women and to men, and how, for instance, these gender constructions colored their experiences. A more exhaustive research that includes the experiences of women in the domestic sphere, in relation to their call center job, can enrich

the literature on the impact of call centers on women.

A female employee interviewed by Aldea et al. provides an insight as to the effect of her BPO work on her domestic obligations. She pointed out that she cannot be with her family even during special occasions, and it's very hard to get a leave when there is a family problem, or even when she is sick.

Admittedly, men and women alike would be inclined to attend special occasions, or suffer the same anxiety during family emergencies, but women are traditionally considered to be the one responsible when a child gets sick, for instance, because of her caring or nurturing "nature." It is the woman who prepares costumes for school plays, organizes birthday parties, sets up decorations for Christmas and other occasions, cooks or prepares the menu, sets up party venues, wraps the gifts, puts everything in order after the events. It is important to ask whether, by working in a call center, with unpredictable shifts and schedules, she is also released from these "obligations," or she is expected to juggle it all. Does her job entail, or result in, renegotiation of gender roles and division of labor within the household?

The same employee interviewed by Aldea et al. also mentions that one of the justifications given by the employers in demanding that they work during holidays, for instance, is the relatively high salary given to call center agents. This is another issue that needs to be scrutinized. Admittedly, the average pay for BPO employees is significantly higher than the equivalent monthly minimum wage (Amante 2008). This is still considerably lower than the salaries of their counterparts in other countries. Sibal (2010), for instance, stated that compared with 10 other countries (India, Malaysia, China, Brazil, Mexico, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia), the Philippines has the second lowest hourly wage for professionals at 13 percent of the U.S. level. The Indians have the lowest salaries at 12 percent while wages in Malaysia were two times that of the Philippines. This was a 2005 data. Compared to India, the wages in the Philippines have not increased that much (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2010).

Amante (2008) pointed out that "there is a significant differential in average wages between men and women, with men

enjoying a 13 percent advantage over women in BPO firms. The simple regression analysis shows that being male or female could explain 5 percent of the variation pay. This means that 95 percent of variations in basic pay could be explained by other factors. Being female in a Philippine BPO means a lower wage profile, with a significantly negative coefficient, all other factors equal” (45). This discrepancy was explained by HR managers of BPO firms as due to the fact that most males have technical or engineering jobs. These positions are paid higher. Females are mostly sales or customer service representatives, who are paid lower. Because of this, Amante commented that Philippine BPO firms need to seriously examine the congruence of non-discrimination policy and practice, as far as pay is concerned.

Amante’s findings are consistent with that of Belt et al. (2002) in European call centers, where salaries were significantly higher in the computer services call centers (for the sales and technical support roles) – where the proportion of male workers was the highest. The study revealed that men vastly outnumbered women in the specialised technical support roles in the computer service call centers such as on software help-desks, and women tended to be concentrated on the whole in the customer service roles. In addition, the work was least routinized, and monitoring and control practices least stringently used in the technical support roles in the computer services call centers, where males made up majority of employees.

The gender composition of the workforce is an important point to consider in discussing the impact of BPO work. As Belt et al. asserted, employers do not view women and men workers as undifferentiated and substitutable groups. Male and female labour are viewed differently and used differently by employers and managers (Bradley 1986 in Belt et al. 2002). It is important to note that “although women make up the majority of employees in general, they do not dominate employment in all sectors and across all task areas” (24).

Other gender concerns were succinctly pointed out by a female BPO employee interviewed by Amante (2008):

Most call center agents are women. They leave for work late at

night, and could be vulnerable to attack and harassment. The call center I work in is located in an isolated business area, just like many other call centers, away from public transport. Most call centers have sleeping quarters. There is also a shuttle bus to ferry employees from office to drop off points in the transport route. Call center staff have no influence over the working hours and shift, which are announced often at the last minute. (52)

Night workers are exposed to greater risks compared to day time workers. These risks include potential danger and difficulty in availing themselves of transport services; effects on health and body rhythms in terms of sleep and nourishment; deprivation in socialization opportunities like attending family and other social gatherings; among others (Sibal 2010 citing Soriano 1985). Safety measures and other arrangements should be put in place to address the specific concerns of women, such as security guards to accompany employees to where they take their rides, arrangement with taxi companies, and shuttle services. Pregnant women should be exempted from night shifts. Call center establishments should provide resident physicians for pregnant women, breastfeeding areas and daycare facilities.

Amante's 2008 study shows that there is no significant difference in the work shift distribution of single and married BPO employees. In his survey, married employees (27.3 percent) who said their work schedules changes frequently are significantly greater in proportion compared to single employees (15 percent). He did not specify the gender of these married workers. Married women who work at night would necessarily have to sleep and rest during the day. Hence, it is important to look into the implications of this arrangement on the allocation of domestic and family work. Does a woman worker's night shift lead to a reversal of gender roles at home?

A key feature of interactive service work is the projection of a specific set of emotions prescribed by the organization and embodied in the rules of employment. Employees are expected to appear happy, nice and glad to serve the customers in spite of any private misgivings they may have (Pico 2006). A call center agent

interviewed by Aldea et al. mentioned that she could not laugh, she had to restrain her anger, and she could not show her emotions because she had to attend to 100 calls in a day and 500 calls in a week.

All these can lead to stress and burnout, which can manifest not only within the workplace but in personal relationships as well. Stress brought about by constantly dealing with irate customers can lead to depersonalization and ultimately, to emotional exhaustion (Sharma & Lohumi 2010).

One of the biggest challenges for them is to remain resilient in face of anger and hostility of customers. This may lead to depersonalization which is characterized by a detached and emotional callousness. A worker in this phase will take a cool, distant attitude towards work and customers. Depersonalization is a stage where worker protects self from the onslaught of stress by "zooming out" emotionally and start treating customers impersonally. Depersonalization ultimately leads to diminished personal accomplishment and high levels of emotional exhaustion is characterized as viewing coworkers and clients as objects, instead of human beings. Derry and Kinnie (2002) found that routine work of call handlers in BPO centers is associated with emotional exhaustion which means lack of energy and feeling that one's emotional resources have been used up and these workers finally become detached, cynical and callous, and their sense of personal accomplishment diminishes. (Sharma & Lohumi 2010, 46)

These tendencies may have an effect on the working women's family and personal lives. Job-related stress and burnout may have implications on the traditional character which has come to be expected of women, that of being caring and nurturing. Additionally, call center work may create a distinctive pattern and lifestyle among the employees. As observed by Dizon et al. (2010), young adults in call centers who do night shift develop a distinct pattern of routines compared to those in regular day jobs. Ofreneo

et al. (2007) also remarked:

For CC agents, work is done mostly at night. Compensation is generally twice or even thrice the statutory minimum wage, with outstanding cyber tele-marketers earning 4-5 times more. With so much disposable income, CC/BPO dress up, smoke, drink and behave outside their offices like yuppies on the move. Some even speak non-stop English in public. The CC/BPO employees appear like a separate or a distinct class unto themselves (Ofreneo et al. 2007, 539).

All these changes potentially challenge gender identities and gender roles.

All in all, majority of the available literature on the effects of BPO or call center work on women do not elaborate on the effects or gendered impact of call center work on women and the implications of such work on gender relations and gender division of labor. There are studies, however, which point out that women are particularly affected by conflicts between working hours and the demands of task performance, and domestic, family and social responsibilities and expectations. To date, there have been no in-depth studies conducted about the effects of call center jobs on the gender relations and gender division of household labor.

A more exhaustive research that includes the experiences of women in the domestic sphere, in relation to their call center jobs, can enrich the literature on the impact of call centers on women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Conflicts between working hours and domestic, family and social responsibilities and expectations, are among the cited difficulties that women call center workers face. As related by Asuncion (2008) married women usually resign from their company after reporting for work for a few weeks due to the demands of work at home and in the company. Government policies on workers' rights and welfare should therefore give enough emphasis on the workers' work-life family balance, exploring ways to address the limited

time that the call center workers have with their families, such as integrating family days with the regular team-building activities, or providing for nurseries, child centers, and breastfeeding station for lactating mothers. RA 10028 or the Expanded Breastfeeding in the Workplace allows among others, paid breaks for nursing mothers to express their milk at lactation stations that management is mandated to provide.

However, it is important to emphasize that measures to ease the burden of working women should not reinforce the traditional gender division of labor whereby women are expected to perform all or the bulk of household and family obligations, in addition to their stressful call center work. The working women's burden could be significantly lightened if they are not compelled to still perform the domestic work when they arrive home in the morning. Research conducted by the author revealed that all of the women call center workers she interviewed no longer perform the bulk of housework and childcare. Since working in the call center has come to mean that working wives and mothers are usually out at night and have to sleep for most of the day, they no longer have any time to do housework and childcare. From the women's accounts and also judging from the male participants' narration, the male spouses do not have any problem about sharing housework with their spouses or even doing most of the work (Domingo-Cabarrubias 2012). To a certain extent, it was shown that despite the persistence for centuries of the unequal gender division of labor, gender equality within the home is achievable. Workers' groups trying to organize women workers could incorporate these findings in their trainings and lectures to illustrate that gender inequality and the gender division of labor at home is not natural and immutable, and may in fact be transformed. Results of the study may also provide useful insights on how to identify more effective strategies of organizing women call center workers by considering their situations both in the workplace and in their homes and finding ways to address gendered power relations. For instance, unions can come up with organizational policies that not only acknowledge the inequality within the household but actually make concrete efforts to address this, at least within the households of their members.

Call center workers' associations as well as workers' groups trying to organize call center workers should also put in their main agenda the health and safety problems faced by women employees in the CC-BPO industry, especially the solo parents, the pregnant women, and the lactating mothers. Safety measures and other arrangements should be put in place to address the specific concerns of women, such as security guards to accompany employees to where they take their rides, arrangement with taxi companies, and shuttle services to ferry employees from office to drop off points in the transport route. There should also sleeping quarters for those who opt to spend the night and wait for day break before going home.

The government should ensure that all call center establishments provide resident physicians for pregnant women, breastfeeding areas and daycare facilities. In addition, pregnant women should be exempted from night shifts.

In addition, the differential in average wages between men and women as mentioned by Amante (2008) should be looked into and addressed. This should be included in the agenda of unions trying to organize call center employees, as well as in any proposed laws on the welfare of call center workers.

Finally, because of the very nature of their job, the fact that call center workers have to leave their families at night and sleep during the day cannot be helped. Many of the participants in the author's research (Domingo-Cabarrubias 2012) bemoan the fact that they could not spend more time with their children, who, as a consequence, oftentimes feel closer to other people than their mother. One of the participants remarked that in a "regular job," she could at least sleep together with her family. Because of call center work, they have to depend on their spouses, or relatives, house-help or *yaya* to stay with the children at night and even during the days when they have to sleep. Consequently, their children sometimes feel closer to other people than to their mother.

The participants all agreed that if they had a choice where they could spend more time with their families, they would surely grab it. For them, call center work is their choice because there is no better alternative.

Hence, there is still no substitute for creating meaningful jobs for our people, where they wouldn't have to turn their worlds upside down to service other people in other parts of the world. Whatever positive outcome that the call industry may have contributed, at least with respect to availability of employment and transformed gender dynamics within homes, this should not blind us to the whole picture of inequality and exploitation that brought the call center companies in our country in the first place. These foreign companies are here precisely because our government has sacrificed our workers' humane conditions as a bargaining leverage for enticing foreign capitalists. These foreign companies are here precisely to exploit these workers in order to accumulate more profits.

Our fight for women's equality, therefore, should also be a fight for humane working conditions, and a fight against all forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation.

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