

# Women in BPO Sector in India: The Dilemma of Empowerment, Work-Life Balance and Exploitation

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## ABSTRACT

A job gives a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of freedom and autonomy to a woman. Today, most of the young girls in metro cities are engaged with the jobs of call centers, which is definitely gives them a satisfaction of self-dependent. Yet they are hampered by the assumption that working outside the home are not meant for them. Because of such attitude of society, women are not able to reach their peak point. This paper deals with the origin of call center industry in India and proportion of women workers in this industry. This paper specifies the major reasons due to which women join this industry and the problems and challenges they face to balance her work life with her personal life. This paper also outlines the working environment of call centers, their conditions, pay gaps due to gender discrimination, exploitation of female workers, effect of working in night hours on the health of female employees etc. This paper lastly provides some useful measures to ensure the safety of women in call centers and some tips to women by which they can ensure their safety and avoid abnormal molestation and eve teasing cases. This paper suggests that society which still believes in patriarchal system should change her mindset because coming India will be based on skills of a person rather than his/her gender.

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## 1. Introduction

The theme of outsourcing is closely associated with the country like India. It has its origin back in the 1700s when producers of the goods shifted their production to the countries which supply them cheap labour and higher productivity during industrial revolution. Inauguration of the concept "call Center" in India has a very interesting story. When Globalization was pioneered in India in late 1990's then many MNC's took advantage of it and established their customer services in India due to the reason of cheap availability of young English speakers as compared to other countries workers. This tradition of customer service was known as call centers.

According to the report of the Global Call Center "out of the total working force in call centers 71% are women". Which means man workforce contribute only 29% in total workforce of call centers. But astonishing facts reveal that despite of the higher ratio of women in call centers, men unreasonably holds higher positions in call centers. Data unfolded that 71% of the workers are women but only 60% of managers and 45% of business analysts were women in call centers.

Call centers are the great hub for employment in India especially for the women but are they really gratified with their jobs, Are they feel unassailable, still remains a ambivalent question!

Current status of women in call centers in India is not satisfied as according to research working in call centers does not have overwhelming impact on Indian society. Women have to confront with severe challenges as many women do not get married because they can't afford to lose their jobs. Besides this it also causes some severe effects on the physical as well

as mental health of the women due to long working hours. Most of the time they have to face ridiculous customers who pass ignominious comments during calls. Not only this but the women also become the prey of exploitation as Indian working culture does not provide a thriving and safe environment to the female workers but since call center jobs are more satisfactory in terms of wages as compared to other jobs, it becomes very difficult for women to leave their jobs when they are hackled by someone because they know they won't be able to grab a job which provides better benefits than this. They face many challenges to balance their work life as CEO of ICICI bank Mrs. Chanda Kochhar has rightly said a woman has to work 48 hours in a day of 24 hours. A Woman has to accept her official responsibilities as well as has to look after her family which becomes a really cumbersome task for her.

## 2. Objectives of the study

- To study the current status of women in call centers in terms of work life balance
- To find out the challenges faced by women in call centers
- To give them suggestions to overcome those problems.

## 3. Literature review

According to Anne Bonds (2006) 70% of workforce in call centers are consists of women. In 2004, in US 66% of workers in call center industry is women. It was also reported that most of the women are paid less as compared to male employees. Women are entrusted with the lower paying jobs which do not involve any specialized knowledge. For instance, a higher number of women can be found at rationalized and clerical

jobs whereas most of the male workers can be found in creative and highly skilled jobs.

As per the findings of Dipa Dube, Indrajeet Dube, Bhagwan R. Gawali & Subechhya Haldar (2012), despite of the equality rights in Indian constitution, it has been noticed that women in call center industry are still prejudiced on the basis of gender and lag far behind when it comes to promotion or increment.

Swati Mitter and Cecilia Ng, in her book write that women workers in call centers which constitutes approximately 70% of the total workforce, seem to experience a new freedom and autonomy with the wages they earn.

Arvinder Kaur and Shivani Gupta (2012) in their article has accentuated upon the reason behind the joining of call center by women. She spotlighted that most of the women join this job because it does not require much qualification and provides limber working hours. Other reasons were easy entry and exit, penurious financial conditions of family etc.

Dr. Kausar Jahan Ara begum (2013) scrutinize about the peculiar working hours in call center industry. She recommends that working on night shifts adversely affects the physical as well as mental health of the workers specially

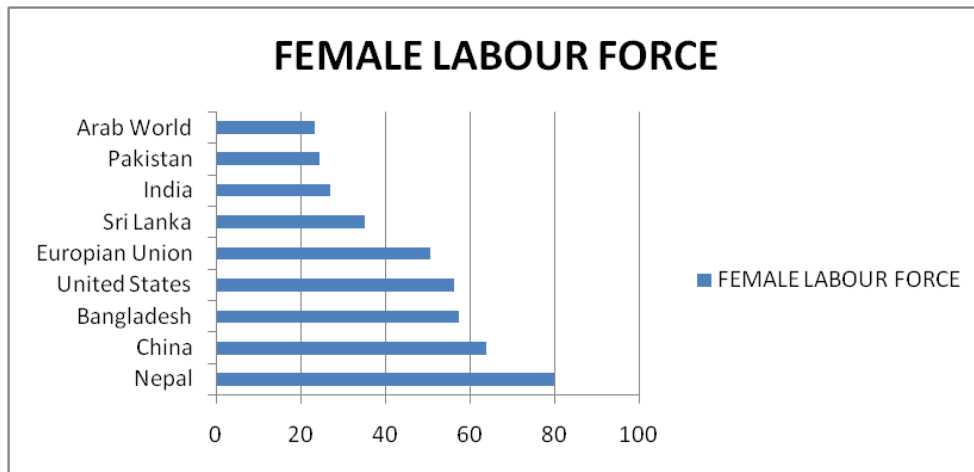
women because they have to be the leaders in their home as well as in their offices. She talked about some aberrant effects of working in odd hours like abortion, pre term birth and lowered birth weight etc. She also expounded that graveyard shift affects the social and family life of women workers which ultimately becomes the reason of psychological stress.

**4. Methods of data collection**

This research paper is completely based on secondary data which is comprehensively analyzed in order to find out the content apposite for the study. Secondary data required for the study was collected from various websites and other web sources and research papers being published from time to time.

**5. Current status of women in call centers**

As per the census 2011, the population of India is 1210.19 million comprising 586.47(48.5%) females and 623.72 million(51.5%) males out of which working population is only 39.10 % and awfully data reveals that female working population is only 31.62%. which is the lowest among BRISC countries; among G-20 countries, it is better only than south Arabia.



As per the research, present scenario of women in call center industry is not satisfied. They are confronted with the several problems as many women have to manage their dual responsibility of personal life as well as corporate life. It has been observed that working in call centers provide women feel a sense of accomplishment because they are independent and no longer dependent on males to feed them, but on the other hand this man driven society does not accept the fact that women can be independent and therefore they sometimes refer call center as “child producing center” or “prostitute center”

**6. Stumbling Blocks In Women Life**

At present, women workers constitute about one third of the total call centers and BPO workforce in India. However, despite such a major endowment of women in the industry, multifarious hurdles faced by them still needs to be addressed. As per Nirmal Mirza, the CEO of Stigita.com, the key challenges faced by women in the call center industry are a

dearth of communication and self expression artistry. There is a paucity of credence among women to speak up about the issues like “graveyard shifts” (night shifts) and adequate safety and security measures.

According to the research following are some towering mountains which obstruct the blooming of women in the call center industry:

▪ **Rejection of society**

Absurd society associate call center women with lower class status and surprisingly these call center industries are named as “house with red doors” or “baby producing centers” .This kind of abominable standpoint of society makes women workers working in night shifts really one-sided. They are viewed as obscene women because they are out of place.

▪ **Gender Discrimination**

Though our constitution provides equal rights to men and women, but somewhere India still believes in patriarchy society and therefore women are constantly subjected to gender discrimination in call centers. Despite of having excellent communication and leadership qualities, women are not entrusted with the superior positions. According to a report women earn 62% of what their male colleagues earn for performing the same work.

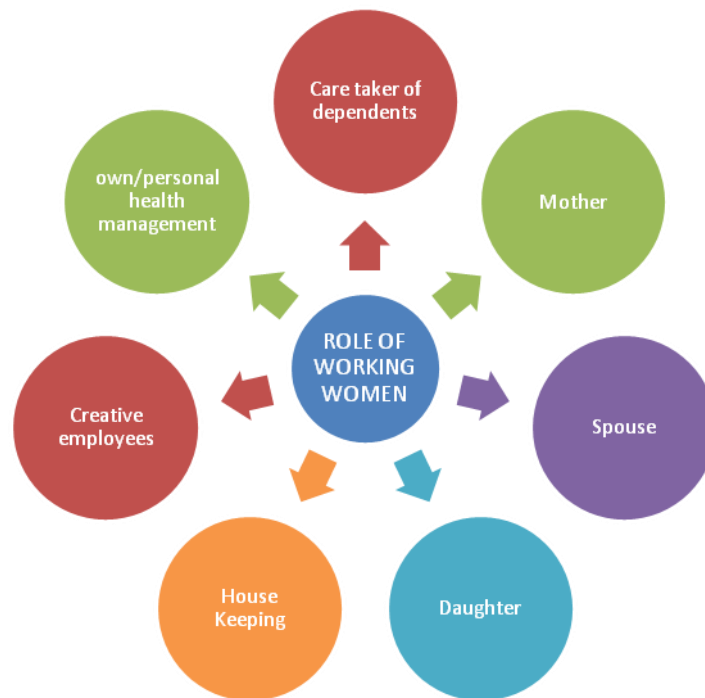
▪ **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment has become synonymous with sexual terrorism which outlines a system where males are controlling and tyrannizing women. Sexual persecution by colleagues and senior staff is a palpable issue nowadays. Passing on

distasteful comments are commonly seen in Indian workplaces. Sex transgression, physical abuse and forced rapes have become headlines of newspapers nowadays. Mostly the victim of such cases are the women working in night hours.

▪ **Work life balance**

As a woman has to work 48 hours in a day of 24 hours, it becomes very difficult for her to manage her personal as well as corporate responsibilities, especially for the women working in night shifts. Sometimes they become the prey of mockery by their own family members. If they do not get the require buttress from their dear ones, it leads to demotivation among women and thus choke their growth.



▪ **Unsafe transportation**

In most of the call centers there is no facility of pick up and drop down for the female workers therefore women hesitate in working night shifts

▪ **Shilly shallied attitude of Women**

Since the literacy rate of women is not very high as compared to men therefore women hesitate in raising up her voice on the issues like “graveyard shifts” and other safety issues.

▪ **Wedding factor**

The other socio cultural factors also works against the women who are working in call centers in India. Sometimes the woman is in seventh heaven and well pleased with her night duty and is getting marvelous remuneration for it, but as soon as the devil factor “**wedding**” comes into play the whole game ruins. In many cases women are not allowed to continue their job because her husband does not like it. And the real problem starts when her family expands and she has to look after her child as well.

▪ **Nasty effects on health**

Working in odd hours by the women in offices and then looking after the family and children leaves an adverse effect on the health of women. According to the studies regularly working in night hours causes aberrant fatigue and is liable to affect in many ways the health of a person. For a call center working women it starts with graying of hair, hair loss and digestive diseases. Long sitting hours also lead to back pain and slip disk diseases. Beside this due to working in computers and with headphones, their visionary and audibility senses stops working in later years.

**7. Suggestions**

In earlier days the endowment of women was only restricted to her home and family but now crossing the boundaries of the man dominating society women has become the cornerstone of national economy also. Here are some fruitful measures which every organization should imbibe in its policies for the amelioration and advancement of women in call center industry:

### ▪ Working hours

Working hours of women should not be expanded beyond eight hours in a day and forty eight hours in a week.. The duration should be inclusive of sufficient breaks between work including tea/coffee breaks and lunch/dinner breaks, not exceeding three hours at stretch. It will encourage women employees to improve their performance and balance their personal as well as official life.

### ▪ Handy work amenities

All organizations employing one or more than one women in call centers should make provisions for such facilities as may be necessary for the betterment of women like separate toilets and rest rooms must be available for women employees. First aid box should be made available every time in the organizations. Apposite facilities should be made for the working mothers and for this necessary crèches can be made available in the organization.

### ▪ Security arrangements

- All BPO's must make suitable arrangements for the women working therein. Following suggestions are given by National commission:
- Women tied up in evening and night working hours should be facilitated by the appropriate cab service and due to cost or some other reason if company is unable to arrange such system, it should avoid employment of women in odd working hours.
- A security guard must accompany women as chaperone.
- Women employees should not stay alone during night shifts; they should not be the first to be picked up from their homes and the last to be dropped home by the drivers.
- GPS of the cabs must be on all the time and it should be tracked by a competent authority.
- A 24 hours helpline number must be instigated at the climacteric step for women security.

- Wherever possible, BPO's must not be located in cut-off areas and should ensure appropriate police patrolling in order to prevent outside incidences of molestation or assault. It is the duty of every organization to guarantee the safety of women working in their organization.

### ▪ Avoidance of discriminatory policies

In most of the BPO's bitterness are poured in with regard to preference of male employees over female employees thus it must be ensured that environment of organization is gender friendly and any kind of biasness on the basis of sex must be avoided. Promotion, salary and other perks must be decided on unclouded policies.

### ➤ Gender Redressal mechanism and sexual harassment cell

In order to curtail the cases of molestation and sexual assault in call centers, every organization must imbibe clear set of policies for atrocity readressal and harassment. Every employer must instigate a committee to harmonize eve teasing issues.

## 8. Conclusion

Since BPO and call center industry in India has a bright future ahead and since women have come a long way in flouting the likelihood and challenging issues of gender inequality that existed in call centers., it is the foremost duty of every organization to provide adequate work facilities to women to balance their work life because women in business, as well as in other aspects of life, confront much more difficulties than men in getting the same results. On the other hand, Women should also realize that they are the drivers of their own life, they have to be on their toes and eye catching in order to beat this man driven society, As it is well said that" women are angles and when someone breaks their wings, they simply continue to fly on a broomstick!."

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