

Chapter 14

Indian Women Working in Call Centers: Sites of Resistance?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on recent (2005) interviews with 20 call center workers in the New Delhi metro area to analyze the impact of employment in international call centers for young middle-class Indian women. Providing a wide range of telephone and occasionally Internet services to customers in the US, UK, and Australia, call centers are a booming source of employment for young English-speaking Indians. Roughly half of the growing workforce is female, and the wages are high by Indian standards. Nevertheless, the need to work at night to service customers on other continents creates special hardships and complications, particularly for young women who traditionally would not be allowed to go out at night. While acknowledging the hardships and obstacles presented by the work, this chapter shows that that working in call centers changes the relationships between the young women workers and their parents. Specifically, it argues that young women working in call centers are implicitly rejecting traditional patterns of family control over daughters, and in doing so they are resisting subordination.

INTRODUCTION

For the eight months since she has graduated from college, Trishna has worked nights in a New Delhi call center helping customers in California with their telephone bills. Her workday begins at 4 pm when the company van picks her up at her house. By 5 pm she is at her desk getting her

equipment and computer files ready, at 5:30 pm, 7 am in California, the computer begins sending calls to her workstation. The first hour is usually slow, but by 6:30 she is on the phone constantly, a new call sent to her as soon as she finishes the last one. Trishna can earn extra pay if she meets all of her targets. To do so she must take at least 50 calls, resolve the concerns of all the callers

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without errors, follow protocol on each call, and meet standards for average call length and time spent off the phone. During the shift she'll have three breaks, two 15 minute breaks and one for thirty minutes, just enough time to run to canteen for tea and a bite with her friends. At 3:30 am she logs off, completes her paper work, attends a team meeting, and gets on the van for the ride home. By 5 am she is in bed, hoping to fall asleep before the noise of her family's morning routines awakens her.

Only 21, Trishna is the breadwinner in her household, providing the majority of the money to support her parents, grandparents, and sister; her father is out of work and her mother has never had a job. When she is not working, Trishna is studying for her MBA. She is an ambitious young woman. "I want a very high post," she says. "I couldn't have reached my goals on my parents' income, but now I see possibilities." Although Trishna found work in a call center just four days after graduating from college, her parents were not pleased with her decision.

"People's perception is that the job is easy money but bad because you work at night, smoke and drink. My parents said I shouldn't do it but my friends said it's not that bad.... Just after college my parents tried to marry me off. They were under pressure from relatives. They used to push me to get married but now see me as an asset. Now they see the virtue in my waiting to marry. Now they say that marriage is my decision."

Trishna and other workers in India's booming call center industry are part of a new trend in the international division of labor; the outsourcing of customer service and other "back office" work. Is the rapid transfer of telephone service work to India a good thing for the middle-class graduates like Trishna who are filling the jobs, or is it yet another example of exploitation of third world workers by global capital? This paper does not

answer the question completely, but does examine one dimension where the work does seem to be empowering: the changes it has made on their role in their parent's household. Most of the young women working in call centers are unmarried college graduates. According to traditional Indian culture these young, middle-class women should be entering into arranged marriages, or at the very least building high-status careers that will contribute to the reputation of their families. Instead they are out all night on the telephone with foreigners, often earning more than their fathers. In this paper I argue that for young women, working in call centers support their rejection of traditional patterns of family control over daughters. Specifically, I argue that call center employment challenges or changes the role of Indian daughters in three ways: it provides young women with the option of financial independence, the workplace relations do not reinforce hierarchies of gender and age, and it endangers the young women's sexual reputation, and therefore the potential for male family members to gain status from her employment.

I do not mean to claim that these are all-around great or empowering jobs; there are some serious problems in the occupation. Nevertheless, because call centers make possible a rejection of a submissive, dependent role, they are in some ways empowering for young Indian women.

My comments here are based on research I conducted in the New Delhi metropolitan area from January to March 2005. While there I interviewed 20 call center workers. Interviews ran one to two hours in length, and were open ended in structure. The workers were recruited through ads in newspapers, through referrals from other workers, and through employers. While obviously not a representative sample, the interviews do provide some fascinating qualitative insights into the perspectives and experiences of call center workers.

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