GENDERED SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WORKERS IN CALL CENTERS

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ABSTRACT

The business process outsourcing and call centre industry in India has a high prospect in present and coming future. As women are an essential part of this industry, presently, women workers comprise of nearly one-third of all the call centers and BPO's Indian labor force. Nevertheless, regardless of such an important economic input of women to this industry, quite a few issues and challenges are encountered by women. From having suffered some form of workplace sexual harassment during the course of their work to challenging social dogmas and taboos related to the women in India .Women within the age group of 30's encompasses a mass of the BPO labor force. It is so because call centers prefer women for dealing straightforwardly with the people. Women workers working with BPO's are pulled towards it due to the flexible hours of work which make rooms for meeting their child care requirements. Nevertheless, episodes of crime and dodges in safety reveal stringent measures which are of utmost priority and that government and NGOs both have integral role to play to make work place gender inclusive. In our paper we want to highlight the challenges and measures of call centre workers in India. These call centres are the front runners taking advantage of the dynamically changing social, economic and cultural set up yet at the same time are also marred by the closed box thinking of the stereotype roles that are assigned to them by the makers of the society who want them to walk on the dotted lines set by them. Dogmas are meant to be broken and that is what women of today's India are doing.

Keywords: Women, Call Centre, BPOs, Sexual harassment

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1.1   INTRODUCTION

Today we live in an age of uniqueness if we compare with the history of humanity. It is an era of vast monetary, social, political, rational spasms, an era of speedy development, transformation and immense concern for societal guiding principles and human rights and therefore putting us in challenging position for reevaluating our theories, doctrines and philosophy. We are in the age of transformation.

It's like we have left our past behind, it has become a baggage which we need to get rid of yet the future still seems far away and this journey from past to the present is the transformation of our social ideas. In fact our entire belief system is under lens and is being challenged every day.

Gender inequality is one of the oldest dogmas that existed on this earth since time immoral. It was ann. Oakley and others used the word 'gender' in 1970's to explain the traits of men and women that are collectively decided compared to the ones that are physically differentiated. Gender is a dynamic concept. It is found that roles of women differentiate immensely from one custom to the other and from one group of individual to the other contained in similar culture. According to World Bank Policy research report†"Gender refers to the socially constructed roles and socially learned behavior and expectations associated with females and males. Females and males are different biologically but every culture interprets and elaborates these innate biological differences into a set of social expectations". It was an objection on the part of United Nations against the marginalization of women from the benefits of development during the United Nations decade for women (1976-85) which stimulated women's role in the technology not only as users but also as an innovator and producer. Such thinking puts women in the forefront of a move towards reshaping and revolutionizing the technology management.

1.2   DEMOCRACY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GENDER

No sustainable development is possible until we find the adequate means to sustain the present generation for the sake of future generation. Sustainable development if not gendered is endangered. Democracies that came in existence in 1940s had their own agenda after independence among which some of the main concerns were to achieve self-sufficiency, agricultural sustainability, to fight for increasing population which started to threatened the very structure and institutions created by the State. This led to some of the harsher measures like on Child policy introduced by China. Amongst all this, the democratization of women was not even listed in the agenda.

The relation between gender and democratization is a complex one. According to Shrin M Rai,

"As far as women are concerned, the state is a 'fractured and ambiguous terrain' that demands 'complex negotiation and bargaining by those working within its boundaries as well as on the outside' (p. 74). Under assured conditions it can promote gender justice; however that will be determined by a mix of location, resources, the role of civil society, and strong democratic movements."

Shrin M Rai see "democratization as a 'context bound process' – 'not a wave that comes or goes', but an 'unfolding and untidy process' (p. 69). Very importantly, the feminist idea of democratization goes beyond the boundaries of the idea of the Westphalia State. Rai also talks about the need for the democratization of both public and private spheres and stresses the importance of patriarchy and autonomous politics as a 'meta framework' that helps women to challenge the exclusionary nature of both public and private institutions". Ideas and thoughts like above are the ways through which it can lead to sustainable development, the term which meant containing three pillars –environmental, social and economic issues that are inherently interlinked in a balanced and integrated manner.

1.3 BPO

Business Process Outsourcing or BPO represent outsourcing in all areas/divisions. A BPO firm generally directs and deal with a specific business procedure for a different business. It usually employs prevailing techniques or else occasionally may make use of recent technology in an innovative manner in order to advance concerned business procedure. Presently, India is at the top position for undergoing business process outsourcing; a good number of the businesses of US and UK outsource their IT-concerned business process to Indian BPOs.

BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) is an emergent segment in India, especially in ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) industry. Indian BPO sector flourished just because of some special factors, like an economies of scale, trade related risk minimization, price effectiveness, effective utilization of resources and better capability. BPO was started in the mid-90s in India, which has grown tremendously.

World's favored market for BPO companies is now India; some close competitors are also present like Australia, China, Philippines, and Ireland. India is the favorite reason because of low-priced labour force and its immense pool of talented, skillful, good communication skilled professionals. According to the research conducted by NASSCOM, orientation towards provision of quality amongst top BPOs, 24/7 hours of work, exceptional geographical locality of India and tax structure being investor-oriented have popularized the Indian BPO industry.

1.3.1 SERVICES PROVIDED BY INDIA'S BUSINESS PROCESS OUTSOURCING FIRMS

Different types of services catered by Indian BPO's are as follows:

1. Customer support services after sales: 24 by 7 hours call center customer services that look into their query via telephone, email or chat.

2. Technological assistance for sales or pre-sales: fitting, product maintenance, operational maintenance, emergency, and user assistance and solving issues for computer software, hardware, and internet set up.

3. Telemarketing assistance: Telephonic interaction/ cold calling with probable clientele along with producing awareness regarding buyer's products.

4. Information Technology query handling services: Multiple levels of assistance, crisis solving, both technical and non-technical, workplace efficiency, solve queries for usage of products and executing distant diagnostics.

5. Insurance process: Latest trading purchase and advancement in the insurance sector, death or maturity claims processing, policy maintenance and policy management.

6. Data entry and data processing of any firm: Data entry from paper, manuscripts, images, e-books, yellow pages, websites, business tags, printed documents, software applications, receipt, bill, catalog and mailing list.

7. Record alteration services: Conversion for preparing databases, word processors, spreadsheets and software applications. Data conversion of unprocessed information into PDF, HTML, Word or Acrobat formats.

8. Book-keeping in the form of accounting process of the firm: Continuation of firm's general ledger, accounts receivables, accounts payables, financial statements, bank reconciliations, and assets/equipment ledgers.

9.   Form processing services: Online form processing, payroll processing, medical billing, insurance claim forms processing and medical forms processing.

10.   Online research: Internet search, product research, market research, surveys, analysis, web research and mailing list research.

1.3.2   KEY FACTS ABOUT THE INDIAN BPO INDUSTRY

Growth of BPO

The BPO sector in India is grown rapidly and projected growth will reach a 54 percent increase in income.

There is a annual growth of around 50% in the demand for Indian BPO services.

 Over 74,400 Indians has been provided employment in this sector and it is continuously growing. This figure is expected to rise over 1.1 million.

70% of revenue from this industry is from contact centers, 20% from data entry work and the remaining 10% from information technology related work.

 Around 56% of outsourcing business is handled by Indian BPOs.

Contribution of Girls/women in Indian BPO sector:

According to NASSCOM, Out of three one female employees joining the Indian BPO's. Indian BPOs' current wealth is approx. $143-billion as per NASSCOM.

Nasscom's' Diversity and Inclusion Summit 2016, shows that the 3.7 million females were joined BPO's in 2015.

 "One-third of the workforces are women and it is no longer just support roles such as HR," said Ashok Pamidi, regional head- Karnataka and National Lead Diversity & Inclusion Initiative. As an example, numbers of women in support roles have gone down from 37 percent in 2014 to 34 percent in 2015. Nasscom, however, did not share the data on the number of women joining the sector in 2014.

Gender Equality

The NASSCOM survey pointed out that although the drift of variety and inclusion look promising in BPO sector, India BPO sector still has a long way to go to become a fully developed and self-dependent sector when compared to developed countries. For instance, female managers/ workers have gone up a mere 2% points from 21 % in 2012 to 23 % in 2014, indicating that cultural factors, as well as a not-supportive-work environment, have been huge factors in women climbing up the corporate ladder. One interesting fact about workers training comes out that compared to 67 percent of men who spent time on training, women spent 2 percentages more time in training (69 percent), according to the report. It also said that 28 per cent of the 1.3 million women in the workforce were sole breadwinners for their family and women entrepreneurs/start-ups received $160 million funding in 2014.

The top fifteen BPO companies in India

As per a survey conducted recently by NASSCOM following leading BPO service providers have been identified in India:

•   WNS Group

•   Wipro Spectramind

- Daksh e-Services
- Convergys
- HCL Technologies
- Zenta
- First Source
- MphasiS
- EXL
- Tracmail
- GTL Ltd
- vCustomer
- HTMT
- 24/7 Customer
- Sutherland Technologies

1.4   GLOBALIZATION: CREATING NEW AVENUES FOR WOMEN

Globalization is a route wherein the economies and societies of different countries inter-dependent, interconnected and integrated in such a way that one episode in one country will affect people in other the other country. Conversely, since this practice is not constant all over the globe, it leads to differences and disintegration.

On this front, gender equality is very significant in the process of growth. The outcome of the practice of globalization might be progress in new areas, but owing to uneven allocation of growth advantages, women have been unfavorably affected in countless instants.   The requirement is to generate new prospects for women to be part of this expansion path. Proper implementation rather than enacting of legislation is the need of the hour.

With the start of the new millennium, the global need for IT was expected to rise at the remarkable rate of 66% p.a. (communiqué India, no. 2, February 2002); India well thought-out that it had the prospects to offer for a huge component of the IT industry. Call Centres became the symbol of new India, shining India which had women as its majority workers. Probably the reason may be that training required to become a call centre employee is not as expensive as becoming a soft ware engineers. As a result semi-urban women, English speaking women became a part of this multibillion dollar off-shoring boom on the part of capitalist and westernized global world. It was a turning point in the lives of Indian women who last saw any kind of gender specific civil movements during British Rule liberating them from the traditional forms of bondage like Sati, widow remarriage etc. Twenty -Four -hours call job also grew in demand as transnational companies wanted to take advantage of the difference in the time zones. But it was literally a change in the economic policies of both United States and India that opened the door of sleeping giant known as India, for United States of America which was facing a recessionary downturn. It turned out to be an opportunity wherein transnational giants just could not afford to miss. As India welcomed transnational companies BPO, KPO industries started flourishing which brought giants like American Express, Microsoft, and General Electric etc into India as they shifted their operations like payroll processing, tax preparation, medical and legal transcription etc. A lot of inclusive efforts have been put in to grow as a modern, technologically advanced state, and the IT industry is taken as a major provider to its growth. India's BPO industry is younger and smaller, but growing even faster. About 70% of the BPO industry's revenue comes from call-centre's; 20% from high-volume, low-value data work, such as transcribing health-insurance claims; and the remaining 10% from higher-value information work, such as dealing with insurance claims.

2.0 PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN

For enhancing global development opportunities organization introduces outsourcing based opportunities, and if organization deals with it, it will also create a varied range of political, social, economic and cultural problems. And both the countries suffer parent country as well as a host country. So far the present debates are about the creation of wealth and employment loses in the job creation countries. The involvements of nations that are receiving these jobs have to be addressed from the point of view of dynamically changing work ethos and involvement of new stakeholders.

Panteli, Stack and Ramsay (2001) in a comment on United Kingdom, "State the growth of the information technology should have opened up new possibilities for women to enter these occupations. "However its growth to some extent has been used to build and sustain gender differences and to manage male hierarchies". Although there has been some improvement in the representation at the level of management yet it is still not a level playing field and there is still the existence of male dominance at the higher level and women tend to be concentrated in the lower echelons of it. Women in India experience slow progress as compared to their male counterparts. Getting into the industry seems easier but the marginalization of women and low paid wages are the stark reality of India.

According to Cathy Feingold, the International Economy has created not only the effeminate of poverty but the "feminization of working poverty," she asserted. Although female than ever participates in today's workforce, the majority of females occupies low-status jobs and is not able to promote themselves to cross the poverty line. Majority of the females are involved in the informal business which cannot provide protection, job security, and benefits. In most of the countries, females are involved as a domestic worker in export processing zones; they are also involved as street vendors, or as suppliers at the bottom of a multinational supply chain.

Some of the challenges women workers faces in the BPO industry are as follows:

1. **Insecure environment-** Most of the women workers of BPO sectors in North India became skeptic about their career choice after the series of sexual assault on them by the cab drivers or security guards and are denying to work in late hours or are deciding to leave their job altogether, says a newly released report from India's federation of industry associations, Assocham. That report was prepared from a survey of women by the industry association, conducted after the gang-raped on a bus in New Delhi (Nirbhaya Kand). The excessive rape cases have hit huge dent in the BPO industry across the country, including Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai — the cities home to thousands of BPO firms.

2. **Unorganized sector-** Females working in unorganized sector are facing very bad situations and not able to achieve the satisfaction level. That's why they are not able to live in hygienic environment; they don't have any medical facilities, and any awareness regarding laws protecting them or awareness of laws regarding wages etc.

3. **Gendernization of the Service sector -** The gender specific roles that are assigned to women in the back office expose the gendernization of the service sector, especially BPO industry. There are specific jobs considered to be appropriate for female employees. This kind of biased attitude leads to gender exclusivity and restrict countries capacity to utilize its human capital resources (due to gender bias) to its full capacity.

Gender structure in back office service

•   **Routine:** This services required only basic skills - women predominate

- Data capture and processing

- Customer call centers are established to solve routine queries, order taking and referrals

- Hotel or rental car reservations for insurance and routine service activity.

- Virtual service centres for online orders like take away food stores, fast food corners (e.g. home delivery pizza companies)

- Discretionary: companies can use females for technical training and problem solving

- Data verification and repair insurance sector (e.g. optically scanned documents)

- Claims processing in insurance and back office banking services

- Tele Calling

- Remote secretarial services

- Customer call centres - account queries, after-sales support

- Specialized: some specialized work only men can appoint by the companies due to hazardous/ dangerous/ very technical work

- Accounting, bookkeeping, payroll processing

- Electronic publishing by heavy machines or printing machines.

- Customer call centres -problem/website design and management

- Dispute resolution/ used

- Technical transcription (e.g. medical, legal)

- Medical records management

Source: Adapted by Swasti Mitter from I.T., vol. 11, no. 2, December 2001, EFY Enterprises Pvt ltd, New Delhi.

The major barriers in recognizing women's role in the technology have been the widespread assumptions that an existence of mechanical engineering and associated technical and scientific subjects cannot exist without the formal western mode of education, which has always been accessible to man.

4. Various personality disorders and other psychiatric problems- Call centres have profound impact on the cultural and social behavioral patterns of young Indian and their families. A rising number of call centre women workers are complaining of stress, panic attacks, depression, relationship troubles, alcoholism etc.

5. Racial and Cultural Abuse- The very outsourcing that inspires a large youth of the country to adopt western culture is subjected to racial slurs and slangs. Due to employment losses out sourcing has generated lot of resentment in the countries receiving outsourcing.

3.0   ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AS WELL AS NGO IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THESE WOMEN WORKERS AS AN EQUALITY TOOL

Gender mainstreaming sought to bring women's concerns and gender inequalities into focus that these may be addressed in planning, formulating and designing policies, which can be oriented towards

gender equality among men and women. The need for sensitization on gender issues among various quarters was highlighted as an essential precursor to be able to achieve effective mainstreaming.

MHRD and MIT have devised various schemes mainly in the field of training and management in ICT.

I.   Support for Distance Education & Web Based Learning (NPTEL)- In 2003, MHRD instigated a project National Programme for Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) for enhancing skillful effectiveness in the area of technology-driven education and enhancing quality engineering education by driving curriculum based video courses (at least 100) and web based e-courses (at least 115) to be prepared by seven IITs at Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kanpur, Kharagpur, Guwahati, Roorkee and IISC, Bangalore as participating institutions with a total outlay of Rs. 20.47 crores.

II. Technology Development Mission- The Technology Development Missions (TDM) started in 1993 at all the IITs and IISC with the sole motive of combined effort of the country towards technological development with the direct participation of the industry. Ministry of Labour & Employment and Government of India have cropped up with significant defensive measures for protecting the interest of working women. There is a need that these measures be implemented in the private sector also.

III. Safety/Health Measures- According to Section 22(2) of the Factories Act, 1948 no woman will be permitted to clean, involve in lubrication or in adjusting any component of a major transporter or of any transmission machines. Whereas the major service delivery or transmission machines are functioning, or to clean, lubrication or regulation of any division of machinery would be risky for the woman worker in the form of injury from any functioning part which may be of the same machine or by any adjoining machine.

IV. According to Section 27 of the Factories act, 1948 women are prohibited from working in any division of an industrial unit in the process of pressing cotton in wherein a cotton opener is working.

Prohibition of Night Work

I.   As per Section 66(1)(b) of the Factories Act, 1948, none of the woman shall be permitted to work at any place beyond working hours of 6 a.m. to 7 p.m.

II. Section 25 of the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 specifies that woman will be permitted to work in any industrial location only between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.

III. Section 46(1)(b) of the Mines Act, 1952 disallows employing of women in any mining activity above ground beyond 7 p.m.

Prohibition of Sub-terrain Work

As per Section 46(1) (b) of the Mines Act, 1952 no women shall be allowed to work in any part of a Mine below ground.

Maternity Benefit

The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 standardizes the working of women in specific institutions for certain stage which is before and after child-birth as well as providing maternity benefits. The Building and Other Constructions (regulation of employment and conditions of service) Act, 1996 offers welfare funds as maternity benefit to female workers.

Provisions for Separate Latrines and Urinal

Provision for separate latrines and urinals for female workers exist under the following:

• Rule 53 of the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.

• Section 19 of the factories act, 1948.

• Rule 42 of the Inter State Migrant Workmen Central Rules, 1980.

• Section 20 of the Mines Act, 1952.

• Section 9 of the Plantations Labour Act, 1951.

Even with these actions, Government of India's efforts is still not up to the mark for establishing a secure and healthy working atmosphere for female workers in India. Now at this point NGO's place, a crucial role for the civil societies and have been instrumental in creating accessibility in the areas which were inaccessible to government policies. These regions include rural areas which even today are far away from the kind of sustainable development that the millennium development goals set by United Nation have envisaged for the world in general. Since 1972, The Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has been giving chance to the females in the informal sector in India. SEWA is one of the first International Association to introduce the prospect of using it for the productive growth of the informal sector. SEWA has established technology information centers in more than 15 districts of Gujarat to provide computer awareness training and basic computer skills for there "barefoot managers", build the capacity of women organizers and leaders, and strengthen their members' micro-enterprises. NGO sets so many examples to develop the favorable environment, the government and other sponsoring agencies should expedite women development through ICT. There are certain measures required on the part of the government to ensure safety for the female workers.

Mandatory requirements by the Government for the companies

• Company has to install GPS system in cabs for closed monitoring.

• Company has to organize self-defense Programmes for women

• Company has to provide flexible working hours

• Company has to cover by CCTVs to their workplace to prevent sexual harassment

• Company has to verify their cab drivers, peons and security guards by police,

• Company has to introduce as an efficient complaint redressal systems, which are compulsory for all employers.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Gender bias is the roadblock in the path of sustainable development. Sustainability-- through its potential of financial wealth, societal equity, and environmental uprightness -- is almost not a controversial goal.

This area has absolutely improved the social mobility and extraordinary participation in the work of women workforces in grasping direct opportunities provided by IT. Though at the strategy level, the principle of Equal opportunity for female workers is criticized, yet the ground research shows that in practice females go bad at certain lower positions such as entry and middle level in the job hierarchy and focused in certain specific areas like HR, Call centers, marketing, financial sector etc. The analysis shows that the gender relation at the office projecting specific type of orthodox image of female

workforce and societal constraints force them in experiencing glass- ceiling causing overestimation in some specific job divisions in the lower rung while there is scant

Strategists have generally ignored the ways that strategies designed for promoting "sustainability" and gender equality at a local level, national level, and at global level scales as these strategies have been molded and controlled by capitalist social relations. As sustainable ventures map onto modern urban strategies and social justice movements; the latitudinal strategies of maintenance planning and resource use; liberal sustainability have to contain the progression of gender along with it, otherwise it will be caught in times' hand.

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