Gender Eclipsed? Racial Hierarchies in Transnational Call Center Work

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Feminist ethnographies on the nature of global capitalism have provided a wealth of knowledge on the gendered nature of transnational subcontracting and on the ways that women in the many parts of Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America have been constructed as the “ideal” workers within transnational factories producing garments, food products, shoes, electronics, and transcriptions at nominal cost in developing countries. This article explores a seemingly opposite trend at play in Indian call centers that provide voice-to-voice service to U.S. clients. Call center work is in many ways the epitome of what is commonly seen as “women’s work.” Providing good service on the telephone requires skills associated with hegemonic femininity, such as being nice, making customers feel comfortable, and dealing with irate customers (Hochschild, 1983; Steinberg and Figart, 1999; Leidner, 1999). Yet, interestingly enough, call center work in the newly emerging centers in New Delhi is not always segregated by gender. In fact, in the interviews I conducted, managers, trainers, and workers unanimously and emphatically construct their jobs in call centers as free of gender-bias and equally appropriate for male and female workers.¹ This article evaluates these discursive claims of occupational desegregation in transnational call center work in India. I argue that the gender segregation in segments of the outsourced call center industry in India is situated within the context of racial hierarchies between Indian workers and Western customers, which fundamentally structure transnational service work. Gender is “eclipsed” in the sense that it is hidden behind a profound, racialized gendering of jobs at a transnational level.

Segregation and Desegregation in Global Production

One hallmark of transnational subcontracted work has been the vast numbers of jobs specifically targeted for women workers. Since the 1970s, researchers have

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noted women’s overrepresentation in export-processing industries (Salzinger, 2003: 12). As Basu and Grewal (2001: 943) summarize, “capitalism [has] depended on sexism in order to be global.” Ong (1991: 287) notes that “if we look at the figures for all off-shore industries, women tend to comprise the lower-paid half of the total industrial work force in developing countries.... They are concentrated in a few industries: textiles, apparel, electronics, and footwear.” Women’s appropriateness for these jobs is often defined in ideological terms (such as natural dexterity or assumed nimbleness) and women workers earn 30 to 40% less than men do worldwide (Steans, 2003: 368). Salzinger traces the ways in which women have been constructed as the ideal workers in Mexican maquilas, whereby “‘femininity’ has become closely linked to productivity, and ‘masculinity’ to sloth and disruption” (2003: 10; Bergeron, 2001; Carty, 1997; Ong, 1991). As Steans (2003: 368) notes, “in Asia, in the 1980s, women made up 85 percent of workers in Export Production Zones. In other areas, the figure for women workers was typically around 75 percent.”

More recently, feminists writing about transnational global regimes have noted the growing desegregation of traditionally feminized subcontracted jobs. Meera Nanda (2000: 26), for example, provides evidence of the rising defeminization of offshore work, arguing that “computer-aided manufacture and flexible production techniques are changing the skill requirements and gender composition of workers employed by the apparel and microelectronics industries.” Nanda notes that women face the risk of being displaced from the export-oriented sector as men fill the more skilled and better jobs. Salzinger similarly documents the growing integration of men into the maquiladoras in a case study of a factory that employs an equal number of women and men. She notes that “the subjects who are enacted are not ungendered; they are implicitly masculinized” and all workers are assumed to be breadwinners automatically invested in autonomy and high productivity (Ibid.: 101–112). Gender is not enacted as a difference between women and men; rather “men become a new prototype.... Minor increases in shop-floor autonomy and pay made men seem a natural new workforce” (Ibid.: 122).

Analysis of gendered regimes across local and national contexts provides insight into the highly contextual and shifting nature of the constructions of gender norms. Poster (2001) compares three high-tech organizations—a U.S. company based in Silicon Valley, a U.S.-owned transnational based in India, and a locally owned Indian company—to analyze how and why workers come to believe that some jobs are more appropriate for women or men. Across contexts, Poster finds that executive jobs are favored for men, while administrative jobs are favored for women. Interestingly, certain other jobs (such as engineering) are seen to be more appropriate for men by workers in the U.S., but more appropriate for women in India. Poster argues that job titles are differently gendered across nations, but workers in India and the U.S. evoke different discourses to explain their views on the gendered nature of particular jobs. For example, U.S. workers more often cite “nimble fingers” discourses that stress...
that women and men have different skills that arise from biology or socialization. India-based workers more frequently cite discourses of “dangerous spaces,” noting that certain work timings, environments, or processes are less appropriate for women given that jobs in transnational corporations require interactions with men who are foreigners. Poster’s ethnography demonstrates the ways in which notions of masculinity and femininity are differently created across national contexts in relation to local labor markets. The analysis of call center workers below adds to the body of work that demonstrates how femininity and masculinity are enacted in local contexts and simultaneously situated within racialized transnational regimes. The call center workers I interviewed in India are employed in a demographically integrated occupation in that there is little difference between the nature of tasks and pay levels of male and female workers. As argued below, the gendered norms that emerge are significantly structured by the racialized relations between workers in India and the clients they serve in the U.S.

Methods

The primary purpose of this project was to explore the nature of gendered work within the context of global economic relations. As a newly emerging form of work, transnational call center work in India provides an ideal site to explore the issues raised above. I was interested in how call center workers in India serving international clients do telephone service work across national borders. My main focus is on female and male workers who work in customer service centers, where they make voice-to-voice contact with international clients calling 1–800 numbers. In recent years, India has installed reliable, high-capacity telephone lines in many of its major cities. As a result, over 500 foreign companies now outsource work to about 300 phone-based call centers in India. The sector has seen considerable growth; as Datta (2004) notes, “the Indian Call Center Industry has been growing at a mind-boggling growth rate of around 60% annually over the last 3 years. Employment in this sector has increased from 140,000 in March 2003 to 200,000 plus by 2004. In fact, it has been reported that the industry hired 200 persons every working day over the last one year.” Examples of companies that use India-based call centers are British Airways, TecheCall, Dell Computers, Citibank, GE, HSBC, British Airways, Cap Gemini, Swiss Air, America On-Line, and American Express. Operators in these call centers handle customer calls made to toll free numbers in North America, Britain, Australia, and Western Europe (Migration News, May 2001). Taylor and Bain (2004) note that call centers are primarily located in Delhi and Mumbai, although other cities such as Bangalore, Chennai, and Hyderabad are also seeing increases in call center activity. The main incentives for companies to locate centers in India are low wages relative to the West, and the large English-speaking labor pool. This article draws on interviews conducted in 2002 with a group of call center workers, managers, and trainers in New Delhi, India.

Interviews were conducted with 13 call center workers and six managers/train-
All respondents were with organizations serving American clients. Interviews were in-depth, qualitative conversations and respondents were encouraged to describe their backgrounds, career orientations, work habits and interests, conditions of employment, training, feelings toward their jobs, family lives, and future aspirations. Much of the interviews were spent probing respondents’ experiences of their jobs. Rather than seeking to generalize results, this project serves to gain an understanding of “the meanings that respondents associate with events, and that allow respondents to present their perspectives in their own words” (O’Neill, 1995: 334). In total, 19 individuals were interviewed, and this provided a rich dataset for analysis. Although this is a small sample and more interviews could have been conducted, the degree of repetition in later interviews suggested that theoretical saturation (Ezzy, 2002) had been reached.

Call center workers were contacted via friends and colleagues in India. Seven male and six female workers were interviewed. Respondents were, on average, 25 years of age. One man was married, and one of the women was engaged to be married. The remaining respondents were single. All respondents had bachelor’s degrees, and several had master’s degrees or additional diplomas as well. There were few differences in the educational levels of women and men in the sample: five of the women and five of the men had bachelor’s degrees, while one of the women and two of the men had master’s degrees. Two male workers had engineering degrees, while the remainder of the sample had degrees in science, business, or public administration. Only one of the respondents had worked in call centers for more than one year (which is not surprising given the recent emergence of the industry). Workers earned between 5,500 and 10,000 rupees ($150 to $400 Canadian) per month, with the exception of one male worker who had seven years of work experience and earned 30,000 rupees ($1,200 Canadian). Of the remaining workers, the average pay of the women and the men was the same. A significant portion of salaries was tied to performance incentives. Although workers earned more than those in parallel call centers catering to the local population, they were keenly aware of their low wages in the context of transnational wage structures (Mirchandani, 2004).

Besides call center workers, I interviewed managers at three call centers, as well as representatives of three agencies that provide training for workers. Interviews with managers and trainers focused on the history of the industry, labor force demographics, and work processes. All but one of these respondents were male. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full.

The analysis focused on the ways in which women and men describe the work they do. Interviews were coded by gender through an open coding process. This involved undertaking a detailed reading of each transcript and labeling sentences or sections according to the keywords that summarized the central ideas. Keywords were then collapsed into the following 16 categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1994): reason for choice of industry; interview process to obtain job; nature of job and
assessment of skill involved; perceptions of call center work; constructions of work as technical; work environment; salaries and incentives; training; work schedules; work processes; managing customers; masking location and identity; constructing Americans and Indians; comments on gender differences and similarities; impact of work on friends and family; and future career plans.

Miles and Huberman (1994: 253–254) list several ways in which qualitative analyses of interviews can proceed, including counting occurrences, noting patterns, clustering, and making contrasts. All these strategies were used in the analysis, with the exception of counting occurrences since the focus of the project was on the language and words used to represent experiences in the call center sector, rather than on the generalizability of results.

**Gender Eclipsed?**

Given the wealth of literature in the West on the gendered nature of service work in general, and call center work in particular (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, 2000; Leidner, 1999), it was somewhat surprising that the workers, managers, and trainers interviewed unanimously talked about the work in their organizations as gender-desegregated. The following is an interchange with a manager at a large call center:

**Manager:** (asked about gender breakdown of the workforce): It’s almost 50%.

**Interviewer:** And is there any difference in where you place [women and men]?

**Manager:** No. We are an equal opportunity employer.

**Interviewer:** Right, but in terms of women being better at certain processes or....

**Manager:** No, we have not found them to be so much different. And we don’t discriminate in that way....

Indeed, Indian workers are discursively “marketed” by local media and business advocates in terms of the gender and class transgressions that subcontracting allows. As noted in a report by the National Association for Software and Service Companies:

Instead of those hordes of young ladies, think for a moment about call center manning by some very different kind of people. Think of doctors and pharmacists for medical services, architects and structural engineers for construction materials, chemists and agriculturalists for pesticide formulations, and automotive mechanics and driving instructors for automobile after-sales service.... India has a vast reservoir of domain
expertise across industries and businesses. Our educational institutions turn out millions of qualified people in a large number of disciplines (NASSCOM, 2001: C28).

This advertising implicitly speaks to the many advantages of the gender desegregation of the occupation in India. Respondents echo these sentiments:

**Woman:** (asked about the gender breakdown in her call center): It’s OK. It’s equal. In the call center it hardly matters.... Girls are there, [and] boys are there.

**Man:** (asked whether there is a difference being a man or a woman): No discrimination. You are taken care [of] equally whether you’re a girl or boy. Doesn’t matter.... There’s no discrimination as such.

Bradley (1993: 14) argues that “even in mixed-sex groups...evidence indicates that patterns of interaction between workers tend to promote the ideas of the suitability of each sex for particular jobs.” Call centers provide ample opportunity for such task segregation on the basis of gender, since many centers provide numerous distinct processes, each requiring different levels of emotional or technical labor (such as providing customer service, dealing with financial queries, resolving technical difficulties, etc.). Out of the 19 individuals interviewed for this project, however, only one mentioned the possibility of the suitability of each sex for particular jobs. All other respondents, as well as managers and trainers, deny any relationship between gender and skill. The following manager, for example, explores and then rejects the relationship between gender and work abilities:

**Manager:** I would presume that collections would be something that guys would be better at, whereas customer service would be something that women would be better at, more in terms of being able to be on your feet and empathetic *vis-à-vis* being assertive and aggressive and being able to make a [collection]. But then again, that wouldn’t really be true because we have a fair mix of both.... Logically, I’d say that collections would be something (pause), but then, we have so many women who are really good at that as well. I think it’s more in terms of personality; it doesn’t really matter about men or women.

Trainers made similar arguments:

**Interviewer:** Do you perceive any differences in trying to train women and men?

**Trainer:** See, every person has some strong point to them, some weak part. We have got to know the strengths he or she is having and then we
have to take it, that’s it.... We’ve not come across weaknesses that have been specific to gender. We’ve not got gender-specific difficulties.

Despite emphatic comments suggesting that “a job is a job,” which seem to “dislodge gender norms in jobs” (Cross and Bagilhole, 2002: 216), respondents simultaneously reflect on the many ways in which women and men experience the jobs they do in different ways. Although gender is eclipsed at the discursive level, the sections below explore the ways in which women and men talk about their performances of gender situated within racialized encounters between the Indian workers and the U.S. clients they serve.

The Performance of Gender

Feminist theorists have argued that work is gendered through the implicit construction of masculinity and femininity in jobs. Service work, for example, is assumed to require particular gender enactments that in turn reinforce the notion that gender differences are natural (Leidner, 1991; see also Adkins, 1995; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). The gender “subtext” in jobs facilitates the segregation of men into positions of authority and leadership, and women into lower-paid clerical and service positions (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). More recently, however, with the growth of precarious employment in the West and transnational subcontracting in developing countries, assumptions about masculinity and femininity in jobs have been shown to be far from static. Lisa Adkins (2001: 669) argues that in contemporary service work, “performances of femininity—for all workers—constitute workplace resources.” Training programs for service work often involve “scrambling” exercises (in Ibid., quoting Martin), whereby gender is seen as a matter of performance rather than an essential naturalized characteristic. Adkins argues (Ibid.: 680), “workers may perform, mobilize, and contest masculinity, femininity, and new gender hybrids in a variety of ways in order to innovate and succeed in flexible corporations. Thus, men may perform (and indeed be rewarded for performing) traditional acts of femininity...and women may perform (and also be rewarded for) traditional acts of masculinity.”

Call center workers in India are encouraged to perform traditional acts of femininity through the training they receive. Aside from process-based training (on the service and information they need to provide) and accent training, call center operators are given training on how to provide good customer service. In Pringle’s (1989) research on the sexuality in organizational settings, she identifies two hierarchical discourses that characterize the boss-secretary relationship—the mother/son discourse and the master/slave discourse. In line with this, call center workers are taught to emulate two roles during training programs to successfully provide customer service—mothering and servitude.

“Mothering” involves listening carefully to customer needs and providing information in ways that boost customer self-confidence. Call center operators are
encouraged to be empathetic about any problems that customers raise. Respondents describe the training they receive:

**Woman:** Sometimes the caller calls up and says, I’m very upset today. I’ve had a fight with my wife about this problem. Then empathize with him. Sorry Sir, I really understand whatever you are facing. If I would have been in your position, I would have felt the same. I’m so sorry Sir... make him feel confident. It’s not a terrible problem and you haven’t done anything wrong.... You need to apologize.... I’m so sorry this has happened. I’m really sorry.... We have to be patient, more and more patient.

**Woman:** Like if they’re facing some problem...you say, yes, I can really understand that you are being frustrated by this stuff. Once you tell them, yes, I can understand, I can be in your shoes...they’re relaxed that, yes, at least this fellow knows how painful it is, how frustrating it is to deal with this kind of hell.

The mothering work that call center workers perform is accompanied by a complete deference to the authority of the customer. Both female and male call center workers are expected to practice mothering and servitude. Workers note:

**Man:** You have to be empathetic. You have to be polite. Even if you are very frustrated. You cannot express your feelings to the customer. Even if the customer shouts at you, uses abusive language. You have to be polite.

**Man:** Irate [customers] are the most difficult ones, because they’ll start with the four letter words and they’ll end up with a four-letter word.... It’s your job to make them cool.

**Woman:** They say, I want to speak to an American....

As the quotes above demonstrate, workers are well aware of the servitude that their jobs require. This servitude is often contextualized within the rhetoric of national responsibility, whereby India’s attractiveness as a location for subcontracting is said to depend on workers’ ability to satisfy the demands of foreign clients, particularly in the context of the fact that most foreign clients do not reveal their subcontracting arrangements to their customers. As one worker notes,

**Woman:** [In our center, customers] are calling in. But they are of the opinion that they’re calling back [the foreign company], but that company’s calls are actually diverted to our place.... So we have to be double cautious that we don’t irritate the customer, and we have to serve them.

For both women and men, however, their experiences of the servitude and racism is not linked to gender norms and the feminization of their work. Rather, workers attribute customer rudeness to a “normal” part of U.S. culture, and clearly
identify their relationship with American customers as one that is situated within the unequal relations between labor rich and capital rich countries that are implicit in transnational subcontracting. One woman, for example, characterizes U.S. culture in the following manner:

American client, he’ll say: What the hell are you doing? ...For us, it’s a very big thing, what this person has said—we really take it to heart. But out there it’s just a common thing. It’s that way.

The fact that aggressive behavior is seen to be “just a common thing” in the context of encounters between Americans and Indians suggests that transnational subcontracting involves a continual process of racialization. Robert Miles (1989: 75) defines “racialization” as a “process of categorization” through which “social relations between people [are] structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities.” Notions of self and other continually inform the relations of production within which call center work is situated. As Miles notes, racialization is as much about the characterization of an “Other” as it is about the characterization of Self. He provides the example of European explorers who used skin color to define Africans as “black” and as a result differentiated themselves in terms of skin color as well. “Black” and “white” “were bound together, each giving meaning to the other” (Ibid.). The customers referred to by the workers above reinforce a racialized hierarchy between white and other, while suggesting that Americanness forms a particular kind of whiteness in the context of the U.S. dominance of transnational subcontracting. Encounters of rudeness and aggression are normalized through relations of production that simultaneously situate clients as whites, as Americans and as customers. This threefold social location overrides class boundaries that are being crossed with call center work, whereby highly educated Indian workers employed in middle-class, white-collar occupations often are serving lower-class, poorly educated American callers:

**Woman:** Some Americans, they call [and] say, I want to talk to an American. Oh man, go on! You got an Indian and you are telling an Indian that you want to talk to an American! ...Some of them, they really speak very very fast and that is a bit difficult.... In any case, we have to handle the calls. We can’t say, you are an American, we can’t talk to you. Like they have the freedom to say anything, but we can’t say anything.

In these ways, workers draw attention to the uneven development (that privileges national origin, rather than education or intelligence) that is fostered by global capitalism (Wright, 2001). In this context, though they are often told that they need to speak in American accents so that Americans can understand them
(Mirchandani, 2004), workers interpret this as evidence of the parochial and erratic nature of Americans:

**Woman:** The basic idea is that people should understand you.... So that was the main motive behind learning all accent skills.... Many a time people are very happy, and those people [say], how is it possible that staying in India you can speak such good English? ...But at times people are so rude—Oh, let me talk to someone who can speak English! I cannot understand you. We get customers like this also. One call, the customer is saying, oh, you have fabulous English, you speak so well. Another call you get, oh, my god, let me talk to someone who can speak English.

Work processes and structures in Indian subcontracted call centers privilege the needs and, at times, the racist perspectives of American customers. Meanwhile, workers’ descriptions of customers as culturally prone to being erratic allow female and male workers to avoid reverence of “Americans” and deal with the performance of hegemonic femininity that their jobs require. In these ways, transnational call center work involves a “racialized gendering of jobs,” whereby often highly educated men and women of color in the geographic South are engaged in the type of employment that is conventionally associated with deskilled and feminized work in the North.

Workers recognize that subservience and mothering are integral aspects of their jobs, but men rather than women define their jobs as deskilled and feminized. As discussed below, women characterize their work as “technical,” thus distancing call center work from other female-dominated, service-sector jobs. Work processes within call centers in India are significantly structured via technologies such as telephones and computers. The jobs of some workers also involve providing computer or network-related information to callers. Telephones automatically route calls, while computers provide menus where call information can be entered. Computers are also used for monitoring worker performance and login times. In addition, computers provide searchable databases with responses to most customer queries. There is little worker discretion in call center work. However, work in call centers is promoted through organizational rhetoric, training facilities, and job advertisements as providing the opportunity for employees to gain technical skills involving a multinational corporation (MNC). Technical and MNC work embodies prestige in the context of India’s colonial history that of the dot.com success of the 1990s.

Although women and men in call centers do the same jobs, they have substantially different experiences of their jobs as technical. Women note that call centers provide them with the opportunity to gain entry into technical work:

**Woman:** [The thing] I liked about [this company] is these people wanted to take people with computer background and they needed technical [qualifications]. So the kind of job I’m in is not basically handling calls on
customer care and stuff like that, sales and stuff. It’s more of a technical job than calling center. So I was very satisfied with the job.

**Woman:** It’s a technical thing that you’re going to work with. It’s a challenge. I mean, you don’t feel that you’re working in a call center. [People ask] “You’re taking calls?” Previously, we used to have these, just telephone exchanges [for telephone number enquiries]. “This is what you’re doing?” Then you have to explain: No, we’re not dealing with Indian customers.... It’s a very different kind of work that we are doing...it’s totally technical. So I am happy because I will be in touch with computers.

**Woman:** Everybody was a bit hesitant because it was a call center; it wasn’t a technical job, an IT-related job. And then I thought, OK, at least [there is] a bit of new technical things I’ll learn.

Interestingly, male workers with the same job described it substantially differently:

**Man:** This is not a technical job at all.... As far as the job profile goes, I’m just taking care of the customer. This is customer service. So, my educational background is of no use. My abilities are not being utilized by the company. So I’m being paid for a skill which I have not learned from someone; this is part of my personality, how I was taught all through my life.

Leidner’s study of insurance sales agents reveals that while this job requires interpersonal skills traditionally associated with femininity, male agents reinterpret their jobs in terms of typically masculine attributes, such as the love of competition (described by Britton, 2000; also Lupton, 2000). Similarly, Cross and Bagilhole (2002) note that men in nontraditional work do “gender identity work” to reconstruct masculinity. In contrast, male call center workers make no attempt to redefine their jobs in terms of attributes that are typically associated with masculinity, such as an aptitude for the technical. On the contrary, they construct call center jobs as fundamentally non-technical (and deskilled):

**Man:** [You are a] sophisticated telephone operator. You’re not using your brains.... We just try to surf the site...and investigate a solution. Not using your brains at all.

**Man:** What I felt was [my education was] down the drain.... Because you don’t require anything basically.... What I feel is, technically nothing is required. English is required.... You have a computer in front of you; you have a headset and a mouthpiece.... We’re not learning anything because we have it on the screen. And they tell us, “you’re not going to tell anything
of your own. Whatever is written on the screen, you’re going to read that.”
So I’m not learning anything.

Conclusion

What explains the different constructions of work by the male and female call center workers quoted above? Unpacking the gendered nature of transnational call center work in India reveals the ways in which the dynamics of occupational segregation and desegregation are situated within global relations. Researchers have suggested that there are inherent connections between gender, skill, and jobs, but the movement of call center work across national boundaries disrupts the frequent construction of this work as primarily women’s work. At the same time, the links between gender, skill, and jobs are situated within neocolonial relations embodied in transnational corporations. Female-dominated service jobs (with little autonomy and stability, as well as few opportunities for learning) are redefined as “technical” and exported to countries with cheap labor to be done by highly educated female and male workers. In this sense, gender is “eclipsed” in transnational call center work; globally structured gender relations are momentarily masked under the veneer of the professed desegregation of the occupation. The analysis in this article highlights the ways in which these two processes—the eclipsing of gender at the discursive level and the racialized gendering of jobs transnationally—are not opposing, but rather mutually reinforcing trends.

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NOTE

1. Not all call centers in India are gender desegregated. Evidence suggests that this sector is significantly stratified, with incoming centers serving multinational clients (such as the ones in the present study) providing better jobs than local centers do or those providing telemarketing and data processing services. Women tend to predominate in these latter types of jobs (Kelkar et al., 2002). There is no national statistical data on the gender breakdown of the industry.
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