

A STUDY OF WOMEN EMPLOYEES IN THE BPO SECTOR

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Abstract: This study has been undertaken to investigate the opportunities and hazards faced by women employees in BPO's and Call centres of Mumbai. The boom of the call centre industry absorbing increasing number of women employees has various implications with respect to the internal work environment and the traditional Indian families, many of which yet are patriarchal in nature.

I. Introduction

The term "Business Process Outsourcing" (BPO) means sourcing from outside. It is a process of hiring a company to handle the business activities for the other company as a third party. In outsourcing, the third party gets a contract to perform detailed and specialized functions on behalf of the hiring company.

Since the opening up of the economy in the late 1990's, India is affected by the changes in the BPO and IT sector. There has been a mushrooming of what is known as the "IT enables" Industries in the urban areas. It has also been suggested for women that this sector offers greater flexibility for women workers and so it is more favorable for women as it allows new ways of working and better work-life balance. Their work here involves no physical exertion, it is also beneficial for women who leave and re-enter the labour market for a variety of reasons, mainly child bearing and child rearing.

II. Objectives of Study

- To study the experiences of women employees, working in the BPO sector
- To identify the problems faced by them
- To study the gender issues in the BPO sector

III. Review of Literature

A huge number of employees have been hired by Call centres across various cities in India, which include a huge proportion of women too. Women employees have occupied a large pool in call centres, the call centres allow easy entry and exit policies, offer lucrative packages, work in shifts, offer incentives which attracts employees with basic to higher academic degrees and qualification to work here. Yet, they face serious issues like, night shifts, flexible working hours, transportation, socio-cultural factors and sexual harassment, which need to be addressed (Kaur and Gupta, 2012).

Since these call centres follow patterns of work of the host country (developed countries), their approach towards employees too differs from the conventional pattern. Hence, one can observe changing patterns of work to some extent, while on the other hand, retaining some aspects of Indian work.

Women working in call centers are encouraged by their companies to participate in social events and parties though some engaged in these activities. In recent times the emergence of the BPO based industries, and the induction of women workers into this sector have portend great potential to influence the cultural factors in favor of women.

The contemporary workforce is of knowledge workers who have many aspirations, they want to upgrade their skills and knowledge on continuous basis. They demand respect at the workplace, fair treatment and compensation according to their work, transparent reward policies and a good working atmosphere etc Women represent almost one-third part of the BPO sector and their contribution in this industry is major. Technology and certain regulatory changes have accentuated the demand of female employees in BPO sector.

Women working in night shifts suffer from certain behavioural and psychological etc. (Begum, 2013).

In India, women are supposed to take care of their families as home maker which disturbs their work-life balance while working in this sector. Gender discrimination is quite visible in this sector. Women employees need to put in their best effort to come at par with their male counterparts. Employers have less trust on them for accomplishing challenging jobs. Only repetitive tasks are given to them and that too without any autonomy. If any woman happens to precede as a boss then employers don't let her take important decisions independently (Pathak and Sarin, 2011).

IV. Methodology

The research methodology used is feminist research methodology, since it helps to view and understand women not as a category but as distinguished from the other on the basis of caste, class, religion, ethnicity. It narrates that every group of women have different sets of experiences, hence this was helpful in making a comparative analysis of women coming from different backgrounds.

Data for this research has been collected through qualitative tools of data collection. The methods used to collect data were detailed interviews, case studies to get an insight into the lives of women working in this sector. The total number of women interviewed is 100 participants across call centres in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai working in day shifts as well as night shifts.

Sample size: 100

Sampling technique: Snowball sampling.

V. The study

Problems faced by women in the IT/BPO Industry

Women employees report that sexual harassment is widespread in IT and BPO industry. The shocking findings of the study were the condemnation of the implementation of the Workplace Sexual Harassment Policy in the industry. Women respondents discussed that bosses, often seek sexual favours before deciding on promotions and increments.

The problems discussed were increased levels of supervision through CCTV cameras, increased levels of questioning even when employees visited restrooms frequently, fixed duration of breaks, pressure with respect to meeting deadlines, dealing with cruel customers.

Gender Issues in BPO Sector

Many women found it difficult to work for longer hours as their male counterparts, for numerous reasons. Married women found it difficult to stay back in the office till late night, unless there is a dire need to do so especially in case of meetings, because they may face objections from their parents or in-laws. Married women face additional constraints in that they have domestic responsibilities (from which married men usually escape) that require them to leave at a responsible hours. Women working in night shifts complain of sleep problems as during the day they have to cater to the demands of the husband or children, which leaves them tired.

Women respondents state that, male colleagues often complain about having a women in a team, as women employees prefer leaving on time which adds to the additional burden of work on the male team members who consider themselves to be aggressively career oriented.

Women complaining from conservative families complained of the fact that families restrict them to dress up in particular ways to match the lifestyle of BPO's, which leads to them facing a gap with other members, this also makes a way for men cracking white coloured jokes on women.

Many call centres offer on site opportunities. While most families may not allow women to go for it. While an employee can not be forced by the company to go onsite, such refusal does become a black spot on her record if she consistently refuses these assignments and this in turn will affect her career growth. Interruptions in women's careers due to child bearing have particularly adverse effects on their growth, given the rapid changes in technology and the need to keep abreast of new developments. However, such instruments provide only temporary respite to the problem of juggling child caring with work.

VI. The findings

BPO's on one hand, offers more to women in terms of career growth and financial well being but it is also true that it leads to higher stress levels among women. Strict deadlines and ambitious targets have also resulted in women employee "burnout". Repetitive tasks, such as responding to telephone calls more than 100 times a shift have resulted in absenteeism and attrition among many young women employees. A growing number of women employees also experience physical and emotional problems such as panic attacks, depression, relationship problems, alcoholism and sleeping and eating disorders (Phukan, 2006)

Gender issues in BPO sector need to be understood within the context of the distinctive work culture and system of management that have developed in this sector. BPO companies appear to have highly enlightened managements and HR executives and other top managers espouse all the politically correct ideas about having a gender neutral and women friendly work place, providing equality of opportunity, non-discrimination on the basis of gender and so on. However, there is a gap between official company policy and actual practice and the experience of women- and this is true with regard not only to gender but also to broader employment and management issues.

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