Amity Business Journal
2015, Vol. 4, No. 1

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Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow Campus (ISSN 2278-0904)

Technology Management and the Future of Sustainable Development: A Study of Women Workers in Call Centers

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The Business process outsourcing and Call Centre industry in India has a bright future ahead. Since women are an integral part of this industry, at present, women workers constitute about one-third of the total Call Centre and BPO workforce in India. However, despite such a major economic contribution of women to the industry, several challenges are faced by women. From having suffered from workplace sexual harassment during the course of their work to challenging social dogmas and taboos related to the women in India .Women under the age of 30 comprise a majority of the BPO workforce since call centers which focus on communicating directly with the public usually prefer women. Women employees recruited with BPO's are attracted to the flexible shifts which can be accommodated with their child care needs. However, incidents of crime and loopholes in security show that stringent measures are of utmost priority and that government and NGOs both have integral role to play to make work place gender inclusive. Globalization opened many doors for developing world as far as economy is concerned, but it faltered to reduce inequality at the income front and brought societies at the crossroad where they are at a conflict to choose traditional structure or to adopt alarmingly new paradigms of living propagated by the west. The sustainability of development thus lies in resolving these conflicts and to bring in technology management as an effective tool for sustainable development. In our paper we have triedto highlight the case study of call center workers in India who are as the front runners taking advantage of the dynamically changing social, economic and cultural set up, yet at the same time are 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- Technology Management, Sustainable Development, Call Centre, Glass Ceiling, Globalization

Today in the history of humanity we live in an age which is without precedent. It's an age of great economic, social, political, philosophical convulsions, an age of swift progress, change and great concern for social policy and human rights and therefore it presents challenges for us to rethink all our theories, dogmas and philosophies. We are in the transformation age. It's like we have left our past behind, it has become a baggage which we need to get rid of yet the future seems still far away and this journey from past to the present is the transformation of our social ideas. Infact, 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 immemorial. It was Ann Oakley and others used the word 'gender' in 1970's to describe those characteristics of men and women that are socially determined in contrast to those that are biologically determined. Gender is a dynamic concept. Gender roles for women vary greatly from one culture to another and from social group to another within the same culture. According to World Bank Policy Research Report (2001), "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 interpret and elaborate these innate biological differences into a set of social expectations". It was the outcry 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 innovators and producers. Such thinking puts women in the vanguard of a movement reshaping and revolutionizing the technology management.

Democracy, sustainable development and gender: No sustainable developmentis 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

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1940s had their own agenda after independence among which some of the priorities areas were to achieve self-sufficiency, agricultural sustainability, to combat ballooning population.

The relation between gender and democratization is a complex one. According to Rai (2008), "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'. Under certain 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.

Rai, 2008, sees democratization as a 'context bound process' 'not awave that comesor goes', but an 'unfolding and untidy process'. Very importantly the feminist idea of democratization goes beyond the boundaries of the idea of the Westphalian state. Rai (2008) also talks about the need for the democratization of both public and private spheres and stresses the importance of patriarchy and democratic politics as a 'meta framework' that helps women to contest the exclusionary character of both public and private institutions. Ideas and thoughts like above are the ways that 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.

Globalization Creating New Avenues For Women: At the beginning of thenew millenniumthe worldwide demand for ITES was projected to grow at the dramatic rate of 66 per cent per annum; India considered that it had the potential to bid for a large part of this market. The number of women working in the IT-BPO sector grew 60% in the last two years to 6.7 lakh in 2008, as per a survey on gender inclusivity conducted by HR consulting firm Mercer and IT association Nasscom. Call centre's became the symbol of new India ,shining India which had women as its majority workers, reason being probably training requires to become a call center employee is not as expensive as becoming a software 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 which there 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. India has put a comprehensive effort to develop as a modern, technologically advanced nation, and the IT sector is considered as a key contributor to India's progress. India's BPO industry is younger and smaller, but growing even faster. About 70% of the BPO industry's revenue comes from call-centres; 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.

Glass Ceilings-Challenges: Although outsourcing possesses opportunities for enhancing global development, it also creates wide ranging political, social, economic and cultural problems. For both countries that export jobs and for those that receive these out sourced jobs. So far the present debates are about creation of wealth and employment loses in the job exporting countries. The experiences of countries that are receiving these jobs have to be addressed from the point of view of dynamically changing work ethos and involvement of new stake holders. The metaphor 'glass ceilings' was coined in 1986 for "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevents qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization in to management level positions". The metaphor of glass ceilings is equally applicable to the information technology sector. Panteli, Stack and Ramsay (2001) in a comment on United Kingdom, "state the growth of the information technology should have opened up news possibilities for women to enter these occupations. However its growth so far have been used to construct and maintain gender differences and to sustain 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 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 marginalization of women and low paid wages are the stark reality of India.

According to Feingold (2008) the global economy has produced not only the feminization of poverty but the "feminization of working poverty". Although more women than ever participate in today's workforce, the great majority occupy low-status jobs and are unable to lift themselves out of poverty. More women take jobs in the informal economy that lacks job security, benefits, or protection. Around the world, women are working in export processing zones, as domestic workers, as street vendors, or as suppliers at the bottom of a multinational supply chain (Feingold, 2008)

Some of the challenges women workers faces in the BPO industry are (call centers)

1. Insecure environment- Many female employees of BPO Firms in north India became skeptical about their carrier choice after the series of sexual assault on them by the cab drivers or security guards and are refusing to work on night shifts or are considering quitting their job altogether, says a newly released report from India's Federation of Industry Associations, (ASSOCHAM). The report was developed from a survey ASSOCHAM conducted after a medical student was gang-raped on a bus in New Delhi. The rising tide of rape cases have hit hard the BPO industry across the country, including Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai the cities home to thousands of BPO firms.

2. Unorganized sector-Women working in unorganized sector are living a life far below from satisfaction. They suffer from many problems like unhygienic environment, no medical facilities, and no awareness regarding laws protecting them or awareness of laws regarding wages etc.

3. Gendernization of the service sector-In the table given below the gender specific roles that are assigned to women in the back office expose the gendernization of the service sector, especially BPO industry.

Appendix

Table 1: Gender structure in back office service

Routine: requiring only basic skills - women predominate
• Data capture and processing
• Customer call centers - for routine queries, order taking and referrals
• Hotel or rental car reservations
• Virtual service centers (e.g. home delivery pizza companies)
Discretionary: requiring technical training and problem solving – women predominate
• Data verification and repair (e.g. optically scanned documents)
• Claims processing
• Mailing list management
• Remote secretarial services.
• Customer call centers - account queries, after-sales support
Specialized: requiring specific expertise and managerial authority – men predominate
• Accounting, book keeping, payroll processing
• Electronic publishing
• Customer call centers -problem/website design and management
• Dispute resolution
• Technical transcription (e.g. medical, legal)
• Medical records management
• Technical online support
• Indexing and abstracting services
• Research and technical writing

In this table 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.

The major barriers in recognizing women's role in the technology has 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. Multiple 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.

Role of Government and 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.

Ministry of human resource development and ministry of Information Technology have formulated a number of schemes particularly in the area of training and management in ICT.

- Support For Distance Education & Web Based Learning (NPTEL)- In order to enhance learning effectiveness in the field of technical education by using technology, the MHRD, in 2003, initiated the Project National Programme for Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) to enhance quality engineering education in the country by developing curriculum based video courses (at least 100) and web based e-courses (at least 115) to be prepared by seven IITs at Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Kanpur, Kharagpur, Guwahati, Roorkee and IISc, Bangalore as participating institutions with a total outlay of INR 20.47 crores.

- Technology Development Mission- In 1993, the Technology Development Missions (TDM) started at all the IITs and IISc with the objective of a concerted national effort towards technology development with direct involvement and participation of industries.

Ministry of labour & Employment, Government of India has come up with important protective provisions for safeguarding the interests of working women since the time of the independence these measures have to be implemented in the private sector

Safety/Health Measures

- Section 22(2) of the Factories Act, 1948 provides that no woman shall be allowed to clean, lubricate or adjust any part of a prime mover or of any transmission machinery while the prime mover or transmission machinery is in motion, or to clean, lubricate or adjust any part of any machine if the cleaning, lubrication or adjustment thereof would expose the woman to risk of injury from any moving part either of that machine or of any adjacent machinery.

- Section 27 of the Factories Act, 1948 prohibits employment of women in any part of a factory for pressing cotton in which a cotton opener is at work.

Prohibition of Night Work

- Section 66(1)(b) of the Factories Act, 1948 states that no woman shall be required or allowed to work in any factory except between the hours of 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.

- Section 25 of the Beedi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act, 1966 stipulates that no woman shall be required or allowed to work in any industrial premise except between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.

- Section 46(1)(b) of the Mines Act, 1952 prohibits employment of women in any mine above ground except between the hours of 6 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Prohibition of Sub-terrain Work

- Section 46(1)(b) of the Mines Act, 1952 prohibits employment of women in any part of a mine which is below ground.

  Maternity Benefit-The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 regulates the employment of women in certain establishments for certain periods before and after child-birth and provides maternity benefits. The Building and Other Constructions (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 provides for maternity benefit to female beneficiaries of the Welfare Fund.

Provisions for Separate Latrines and Urinals

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 (RECS) Central Rules, 1980.

- Section 20 of the Mines Act, 1952.
- Section 9 of the Plantations Labour Act, 1951.

Despite these measures government efforts are falling short in creating a safe working environment for women in India .Here the role of NGO begin which are part of 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 has envisaged for the world in general.

There are certain measures required on the part of the government to ensure safety for the female workers.

The government, on its part, can make it mandatory for companies

- "GENDER is a socio-economic variable to analyse roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of men and women in any context." (Ray 2000). To have Gender Sensitization Training Programme for the top management in the sector, as gender sensitive workplace is able to utilize optimally the potential of its work force. Another reason to have gender sensitization training programme is because most of the managers holding high post in the companies are generally men, in order to break this glass ceiling gender sensitization training programme for the managers should be made mandatory for every company.
- To install GPS in cabs to have a stronger monitoring.
- To Self-defense training to women,
- To Flexible working hours
- To installing CCTVs at the workplace to prevent sexual harassment
- To police verification of cab drivers,
- To police verification of security guards and peons working in BPOs, and

To Efficient complaint redressal systems should be made compulsory for all employers.

Other practices that women workers appreciate are anti-harassment policy Healthcare and awareness programs, women's lounge and recreational activities

Conclusion

Gender bias is the road block in the path of sustainable development. Sustainability with its promise of economic prosperity, social equity, and environmental integrity is hardly a controversial goal. Policy makers have generally overlooked the ways that policies aimed at promoting "sustainability" and gender at local, national, and global scales as these policies have been shaped and constrained by capitalist social relations. As Sustainability projects map onto contemporary urban politics and social justice movements; the spatial politics of conservation planning and resource use; progressive sustainability have to include progress of gender along with it, otherwise it will be stuck in time.

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