

Taylor Forth

Core 201

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Women's Impact On Working the Night Shift in India

In 2002, it was estimated that there were roughly 336 call centers that had been established throughout India since the pivotal 1991 reforms. By the year 2006, nearly 470,000 men and women worked within these call centers. Eventually, these operations moved to India due to the country being more readily available to provide a cheap, English-speaking workforce. Transnational corporations took advantage of the different time zones in order to gain more access to laborers. After a while, a significant percentage of this profession began to consist of females, as they joined the paid labor force. Throughout Reena Patel's book *Working the Night Shift*, she elaborates on how women were affected by the new style of working, including both the numerous positives and negatives of working at night.

Patel has three questions that shaped the structure of her book around the idea of women working at night. The first one is "how does the demand for night shift workers recodify women's physical and temporal mobility?" (Patel, 2010, 2). Numerous factors such as economic status, age, or living situation (for example, a patriarchal family) affect this question, along with the other two. When Patel writes about temporal or physical mobility, she is referring to how freely women are able to leave during the day or night, just like their male counterparts. Despite

the fact that working the night shift provides an increase of income and education, the concern about their mobility illustrates in certain societies the power and dominance that males have over women. Areas that are perceived to be safe during the night convert into dangerous places at night; stories told about such places are used to govern women's mobility at night. Even though women were able to be out at night, to maintain their respectability and honor in their family, they still self-regulated when and where they went out and what they were wearing. The mobile phone has increased a women's physical mobility at night by allowing them to receive permission through messages to travel somewhere. This technology provides women an existence of themselves outside the household, while still remaining in contact with the head of the household. With the use of the phones, it helped keep women more secure than before.

With the increase of women working at night, the concern over the safety of these women also increases. One way to help combat the dangers of women working at night was providing transportation for them. This not only is crucial in keeping the women safe and making sure they make it to and from work, but this also prompts interest in call center jobs. This industry offers transportation for a variety of reasons. First of all, there is no reliable transportation during the night. By providing a safe transportation method, it helps in recruiting new women employees to the company. In an interview by Patel with a twenty-three-year-old woman named Reshma, who worked in the call industry, she stated that it was too dangerous for her and other women to drive to work at night; therefore, if the industry did not support transportation, she would not have joined. Some transportation services took extra steps in providing safety for women. Specifically in Mumbai, there are trains that offer compartments specifically for ladies-only and segregate

them. This is just one method to protect women on their way to and from work beyond just providing transportation.

Many companies have a system that picks up and drops off employees. For example, a company could carry six to eight employees and depending where they reside, can travel to two hours each way. Another reason companies use this method is because it ensures their workers are coming into work and are on time. Few companies also provide a security guard in the car, so women feel more safe; attempting to help from any driver harassment occurring. One argument that Patel repents is involving another man into the confident space to protect the women (i.e. the driver) is a great example of a patriarchal regime of protection -- adding more men (the original perpetrators of the problem) will protect the women employees. Policies were put into place regarding contacting women to ensure they have made it home safely or making employees sign in and out of the car. Despite these safe transportation methods for their employees, many companies are moving away from them, so they can reduce extra expenses. Overall, call centers in countries such as Mumbai and Bangalore responded to the unsafety of women by instituting various forms of protection.

Patel's second question is in regards to how the call center employment affects women's social and economic mobility? With new working options and job opportunities for women, it would be logical to assume that this would also lead to an increase in social status for women. However, according to Patel (2010), "working outside the home and earning a relatively high wage does not always lead to upward social mobility" (124). Specifically looking at the hierarchical structure in India, women are not necessarily encouraged to work, and if they do, it

should be “ladies work”. Typically, India’s call centers recruit college graduates; however, they have recently been recruiting high school graduates or dropouts, giving women a second chance to earn an income. Prior to call centers, women’s night shift jobs included bar dancing, nurse/OB-GYN doctors, the hotel industry (cleaning), and prostitution; therefore, when out at night, they receive negative, gender-based reactions from men in the form of verbal/sexual harassment and abuse. Despite the negative connotations, women moving into the paid labor force can still be seen as a symbol of liberation -- being able to leave the confines of their homes in order to earn an income, many times higher income than their husbands. Patel (2010) states that the women who employed under the call center industries “are no longer bound by the traditional patterns of family control over daughter. Financial independence provided by employment in call centers has empowered women to be assertive and independent in their outlook, attitude, and career choice” (52). This has to deal with Patel’s third question: “what spatial-temporal barriers do women face, both in household and urban public space, as a result of BPO employment?” (Patel, 2010, 2). Going forward with the idea of the liberation of women, it could potentially change how India perceives working the night shift.

Focusing on Patel’s third question, spousal relationships were affected when it came to women having a higher income. The husband typically still saw himself as superior; however, the likelihood that a woman would stand up for themselves is higher. Patel interviewed Shilpa, a thirty-eight-year-old, who has an engineering degree and she expressed her feelings about her career, her marriage, and how her husband does not support her. She originally worked as a teacher, but then she quit her job and started working a night job shift. This provided her with

more career opportunities and a higher salary; her current income is Rs 50,000, which is the equivalent to \$1,109 in the United States and she receives bonuses. Her husband on the other hand, only makes Rs 20,000, roughly \$443 U.S. dollars. While Shilpa has an engineering degree, he only has a diploma and it would take him four months to earn what she can in just one month. He continuously makes harsh comments about how she should be knowledgeable in comparison to other women because she has an engineering degree. It is Shilpa's responsibility to ensure that their children are educated because her husband believes that is the organization of the family. Shilpa's situation is remarkably similar to the situation of many other women in India. The types of bias, stereotypes, and expectations that they experience and go through in the common day patriarchal society.

Patel's *Working the Night Shift* showcased how the gender roles adapt in the global technology and development. She states that the women she interviewed for the study were able to share changes in social, physical, and spatial mobility. As it can be seen, the women of India, particularly those that work in call centers, face many hardships throughout their professional and daily lives. The natural prejudice and countless physical, sexual, and mental harassments faced by these women exhibit some growing issues in society as a whole. The call center of India has clearly given women more opportunities to grow individually and become more independent. The stigma it entails to work at these corporations at night forces the mobility of daily life to be difficult; however, women in India are challenging the social system.

References

Patel, R. (2010). *Working the night shift: Women in India's call center industry*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.