

WOMEN & BPOs in INDIA

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The information technology enabled services have done to India what fast track manufacturing did to China. After it shed its ‘women with bound feet’ image to bring them into manufacturing mainstream, Indian BPO sector is holding women by the hand to participate in the night shift economy

“The women working on night shift in BPO constitute over 40 per cent of the total workforce in the sector. The stringent security rules adopted by the sector has encouraged families to send their daughters to do night shifts with BPOs,” **Women works during night shifts in BPO sector does not comes under labour regulations. Therefore IT women workers are not permitted to have their Unions.**

From the beginning of the industrial revolution, one reason for night work has been the fact that, if machinery is kept in use throughout the day and night, the cost of producing each unit is less. Where competition between producers is intense, some employers may assert that long hours and night work are necessary. This is so even in labour-intensive industries, such as garment and shoe manufacturing, where considerations relating to expensive equipment and high technology processes do not apply. Today, recourse to irregular work-hours and night work is explained by some by pointing to compelling economic imperatives and concerns about job creation, export growth and the need for cost competitiveness. Workers, facing the threat of widespread unemployment, often have no choice but to accept the reality of “unsocial hours” as the price of having a job. As we enter the new century, one of the most conspicuous examples of very long working hours is found in BPOs/call centers, established in numerous developing countries in furtherance of a country’s export-oriented development strategy. Among the typical characteristics of BPOs are the high proportion of women workers (predominantly young female workers performing low-wage, low-skill work), extensive use of overtime work, job insecurity and a low rate of unionization. Such a situation is ripe for socially problematic employment conditions. The concern is that, in many BPOs, the setting of unrealistically high Production targets often results in night work and substantial overtime being viewed as necessary over protracted periods. Cognizant of this, many governments have stated that they cannot abide by the international standards embodied in several Conventions, including those prohibiting night work for women in industry. The Committee on numerous occasions has addressed the issues of working conditions in BPOs and has repeatedly emphasized the importance it attaches to the need for BPOs-operating countries to improve working conditions and to ensure compliance with international labour standards relating to trade **union and collective bargaining rights**, that measures exist to help women workers combine work and family responsibilities such as the “limitation of excessive working hours and night work, the provision of child-care facilities and the allocation of hours or days of leave to take care of the children”.

Musculoskeletal Disorder (MSDs) in BPOs

Problems	Frequency of MSDs	Location of MSDs	Total no. of respondents
Yes	72		
No	28		100
Neck		13	
Shoulders		11	
Upper back		09	
Elbows		06	
Lower back		29	
Wrist/hands		11	
Hips/Thighs/buttocks		17	
Knees/ankles/feet		04	100
Total percentage	100	100	
Source – Primary data			

It is evident from the above table that the frequency of Musculoskeletal Disorder(MSDs) is high as 72% and low of 28%. It is likely high in lower back region 29%, knees/ankle/feet 4% region. Hips/thighs/buttocks region is also reasonable high as 17%, neck 13%, and shoulders 11% respectively.

The physiological and medical effects of night work have been the subjects of numerous studies over the years. It is generally agreed that, although the effects of night work vary considerably, depending on the worker's age, economic situation and family condition, regular night work principally causes abnormal fatigue and is liable to affect in many ways the health of the worker, whether male or female. Over-fatigue appears to be due to sleep disturbances and also to the fact that night workers have to work in a state of "nocturnal deactivation" and to sleep in a state of "diurnal reactivation" which provokes a discordance of phase between two circadian rhythms – **the biological rhythm of the body's activation and deactivation and the artificial rhythm of activity at work and rest.** Severe sleepiness and tiredness experienced by night workers normally causes reduced alertness and consequently increases the risk of accidents, while on rare occasions it may even cause the so-called "night shift paralysis" – an unusual phenomenon observed among air traffic controllers and night nurses whereby the lack of sleep renders a person unable to react to stimuli which would normally generate a reaction. There is now much investigative evidence showing that fatigue due to night work increases incidents and accidents in industrial operations and nuclear power plants and that it contributes to virtually all modes of transportation disasters, including rail, marine, aviation and motor accidents. The performance of night work is also shown to be related to digestive (gastro-intestinal troubles, particularly ulcers) and nervous disorders which may be aggravated by lack of appropriate food on the shift, or by excessive consumption of coffee and tobacco during the night and by sleeping pills used during the day. There are also studies, which indicate an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases which is mainly attributed to the eating habits of shift/night workers.

Recent studies on shift work and reproductive health suggest that night work and irregular work-hours may also be associated with elevated reproductive risks, such as spontaneous abortion, pre-term birth and lowered birth weight. The disturbance of family and social life adds to the psychological stress suffered by night workers with more or less serious or lasting consequences for their family relations, life style and social adjustment. Surveys show that, in only one-third of the workers, there is perfect tolerance of night work and rotating hours of work throughout their working life. Approximately 20 per cent of shiftworkers are needed to move to day work during their first year of employment due to disturbances in their circadian rhythm, with accompanying sleep disturbances, difficulties in social life, and various stress reactions. As an ILO study on the subject concluded, "it appears to be well established that, from both the physiological point of view and the family and social point of view, night work is harmful to the large majority of workers and is, therefore, to be According to ILO (International Labour Organization) studies, night workers in the industrialized countries account for 30-40 per cent of the economically active population. It is generally agreed that night work tends to increase in line with industrialization and urbanization. There are as yet no studies to determine whether night work is more common in sectors where telecommunications advances and the globalization of markets make it possible for those working on computers to work outside the office and during non-standard hours. In industrial settings, available data show that the rate of participation of women in night work is generally much below the male participation rate, but of course this reflects a situation where legal prohibitions on women working at night impact upon the data. It is not possible to estimate what the rate would be if the prohibition on women working at night was removed completely. Therefore evaluation and impact is more useful.

In addition to the Indian ITES success story, the other facilitator for the upswing in women participation in night economy has been the amendment of the Factories Act that allows women employees to work night shifts between 10 p.m. and 6 am. This has seen major increase in the percentages of women working in the healthcare, textile, garments, handicrafts, leather and IT sectors, according to the study.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

The Govt. of India and various state governments have starting taking the ITeS industry very seriously. NASSCOM has done a wonderful job in working with the govt to formulate new policies which are in favor of the ITeS industry.

To promote India as a major destination for the ITES sector, the government is also considering a proposal to set up an "India Brand Marketing" fund. The fund will be utilised to promote the country as a preferred destination for the ITES sector.

The government is also planning to create infrastructure for the ITES sector in various parts of the country. The government is trying not to limit the growth of ITeS only to big cities. Bodies like [Confederation of Indian Industry](#) (CII), [Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce](#) (FICCI), [Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India](#) are taking initiatives along with universities to include ITeS in the curriculum.

Though many of the organizations have emphasized on gender diversity bias, there is still a need for more number of affirmative policies for empowering women in BPO sector. Such as –

- Flexi-timing
- Tele-commuting
- Career planning seminars and workshops
- Conducting gender sensitization for men and women
- Developing good support system to all women to main work-life balance
- Strong recruitment policy for selecting more number of women at the front line management in the firm

Women working on shifts tend to suffer from following psychological and behavioral syndromes:

- Irritability
- Alcohol use
- Ulcers
- Anxiety and depression
- Concentration Problems

One may be able to prevent these problems if one follows these practices:

- ✓ Try and make only a small shift from one's normal sleep awake cycle
- ✓ Have short spurts of change, and then a long normal cycle to allow readaptation
- ✓ Take regular breaks during work
- ✓ Avoid sedatives
- ✓ Relationships – These people also have more interpersonal problems, this is not just because of mismatch of timings with the near ones but also because these people have more anger and frustration, and their social life is affected in turn affecting their emotional self.

INTERVENTIONS

As with all workplace hazards, BPOs/Call centre hazards should be dealt with by:

1. Identification of the hazard
2. Assessment of the risk
3. Control: Elimination or reduction of the risk
4. Review and evaluation of any control strategies
5. To conduct Stress Management Training workshops at the right time to the representatives
6. Over workload need to be reduced as this is one of the major factors in the call centres leading to the job stress. They are supposed to take 45-50 plus calls but the average what they feel comfortable is 18-25 calls
7. They should be provided with good training programmes so that they maintain consistency in their performance without any problem throughout their schedule.
8. Friendly, informal working atmosphere is one of the factors which help the individuals to cope up with stress. So organisation should create a healthy, friendly working atmosphere.

STRESS-BUSTING TIPS FOR CALL CENTRE STAFF

- [1]. Take breaks as frequently as you can to reduce eye strain, voice loss and general stress. The HSE's Display Screen Equipment regulations recommend regular breaks from the workstation and telephone, but not define how long these should be.
- [2]. Stretching exercises help reduce muscle tension and other problems
 - When you can get a proper break, get right away from your work station- don't take lunch or dinner at your at your desk – and do something different. Take a walk outside, do some exercise, chat to colleagues.
 - If you to move frequently to different work stations- called 'hot desking'- check your chair and VDU is adjusted to suit you each time.
 - Take frequent drinks of water to avoid voice problems and dehydration. Tea or coffee can exacerbate stress levels. A healthy diet – snacks of fruit or raw vegetables rather than crisps and fizzy drinks – helps combat tiredness.
 - Each should have their own headset, to avoid catching infections, with volume control, to reduce hearing difficulties.
 - If they get an abusive or distressing call, take a breather and – if you can – get support from someone else. Your supervisors should take action against the caller if this is a regular customer.
 - Having a variety of tasks – moving from one kind of call to a different sort or to paperwork – helps reduce monotony.