GENDER IMPLICATIONS OF OUTSOURCED WORK
IN THE NEW ECONOMY: A CASE STUDY OF
DOMESTIC CALL CENTRES

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The paper explores the emerging gender dimensions of outsourced work in the new economy through a case study of domestic call centres. It is explained that, comparatively, women are disadvantageously placed to share the employment benefits of newly emerging information technology-(IT) based occupations in urban centres. The career prospects for women are murky as their engagement and upward mobility in the labour market are largely governed by social norms leading to gender stereotyping.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, India has been one of the major destinations of off-shored service sector work. Apart from the revenue and employment gains, the widespread practice of offshore outsourcing also led to a massive transformation in the production organisation paradigm of the domestic economy. Learning lessons from the globally distributed work organisation, the domestic sector of economy also found the logic of business process outsourcing quite attractive, mostly on account of its cost minimising potential. Currently, the country is witnessing a second spate of ‘outsourcing revolution’ which is characterised by a marked growth in outsourcing of work processes within the domestic economy. A most visible and vibrant segment of such outsourcing activities is the domestic component of Information Technology Enabled Services/Business Process Outsourcing (ITES/BPO) Sector, which works in tandem with a range of core business fields including banking, insurance, finance and trade.²

The gender dimensions of work in this emerging domestic segment of outsourced work is worth intriguing, as the sector is expected to provide more opportunities for women to access and enjoy benefits of ITES sector work in the new economy. Such expectations are often rooted on the stereotyped perceptions and conceptualisation that women are more suitable for low-end outsourced processes such as call centre work on account of their possession of soft skills (‘sweet voice’, good communication skills, patience and persistence to carry out repetitive work and capacity for team work). The euphoria of optimists in this regard is quite comparable to the expectations that prevailed during the boom period of international call centre work, a few years ago. The research so far available on this area suggests that the over enthusiasm regarding the potential of the international sector to provide quality employment to women call centre workers is largely unfounded, while the sector obviously offered some employment benefits to women at the bottom layers of the career hierarchy (Remesh and Neetha, 2004; Antony and Gayatri, 2008). A major constraint affecting the career prospects of women in international call centres as per the existing scholarship is the atypical timing of work, which poses several social and familial challenges for women, especially after marriage. Since the outsourced work in the domestic sector is largely day-time based, the prospects of the sector vis-à-vis women’s employment are considered more promising. In this backdrop, the present paper explores various gender dimensions of

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domestic segment of service sector outsourcing. It captures both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of employment and identifies the emerging gender biases, which affect a fair distribution of employment gains between male and female workers in this segment of technologically aided new service work, through a case study of domestic call centre agents.

The remaining part of the paper is scheduled as follows. Section II provides a disaggregate analysis of women’s employment in IT and ITES sector of India, to arrive at some broader gender-wise trends and patterns. As a background to the ensuing case study, Section III outlines the characteristic features of domestic call centre. The findings of the case study are provided in the Section IV which explores the gender dimensions of outsourced work in domestic call centres. The discussion in this section focuses on a range of aspects such as profile and sourcing of the workforce, gender-wise patterns and barriers for entry into work, gender biases in organisation of work and allocation of tasks, patterns of career progression, and so on. Finally, Section V concludes by highlighting the emerging gender concerns and issues.

II. WOMEN’S EMPLOYMENT IN IT AND ITES SECTOR

Although the IT and ITES industries currently account only for miniscule proportion of the total female employment in the service sector, the growth of the sector is argued to have increased women’s employment opportunities (Neetha, 2008). The NSS employment and unemployment unit-level data help in understanding the broader sectoral patterns and trends across male and female workers, though some overestimation is bound to happen as some of the disaggregate classification could also capture employment which fall beyond the IT categories. Accordingly, in this section, the composition of women in the IT sector and changes over time are analysed using the NSSO estimates.

| Table 1 |
| Share of Workers across IT Industrial Categories, 1999-2000 and 2004-05 |
| **1999-2000** | **2004-05** |
| **Male** | **Female** | **Total** | **Male** | **Female** | **Total** |
| Hardware consultancy | 5.1 | 12.7 | 6.2 | 2.3 | 0.7 | 2.0 |
| (70.6) | (29.4) | (100.0) | (81.4) | (18.6) | (100.0) |
| Software consultancy | 43.6 | 34.2 | 42.2 | 45.9 | 47.4 | 46.2 |
| (88.3) | (11.7) | (100.0) | (81.8) | (18.2) | (100) |
| Data processing | 19.2 | 19.8 | 5.6 | 6.9 | 5.8 |
| (82.8) | (17.2) | (100.0) | (79.0) | (21.0) | (100.0) |
| Database activities | 10.8 | 5.1 | 10.0 | 7.5 | 20.3 | 9.8 |
| (92.6) | (7.4) | (100) | (86.7) | (23.3) | (100.0) |
| Maintenance and repair of computers and computer based systems | 6.3 | 5.0 | 6.1 | 4.6 | 0.0 | 3.8 |
| (88.2) | (11.8) | (100.0) | (100.0) | (0.0) | (100.0) |
| Other computer related activities | 4.5 | 9.7 | 5.3 | 12.6 | 9.2 | 12.0 |
| (68.7) | (31.3) | (100.0) | (86.4) | (13.6) | (100.0) |
| Provision of value-added telecom services: paging, e-mail, cellular phone, video conferencing, Internet, etc. | 5.3 | 4.8 | 5.2 | 11.3 | 7.7 | 10.7 |
| (86.5) | (13.5) | (100.0) | (87.2) | (12.8) | (100.0) |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 5.2 | 11.3 | 7.7 | 100.0 |
| (85.5) | (14.5) | (100.0) | (82.3) | (17.7) | (100.0) |

Note: Figures in parentheses are male-female shares to total.
Source: NSSO 55th and 61st Rounds.
Women’s share in the IT industrial sectors has increased over the period from 14.5 per cent in 1999-2000 to 17.7 per cent in 2004-05 (Table 1). The patterns across disaggregate categories reveal the growing segmentation in the sector. The share of women workers in the hardware consultancy sector has shown a drastic decline from 29.4 to 18.6 per cent, indicating the growing male domination in this segment. The substantial increase in the share of women in database activities from 7.4 to 23.3 per cent, along with the increased share in software consultancy segment are indicative of the structural changes happening in the sector. Most of the work carried out under software development and database activities in India comprises simple programming through specified directives and provision of data in a certain order or sequence. These activities do not require much skill or knowledge and are largely repetitive and monotonous.

Apart from the share of women in each category, it is important to understand their distribution across various categories as it reveals much insights into the extent of participation in different sectors. The data show that software consultancy accounted for the maximum share of women workers during both the time periods, registering a substantial growth over the period. This is followed by database activities. The increasing shares of database activities and software consultancies highlight the changes in the structure of women workforce in the sector which, on the one side, shows a shift towards more skilled work and, on the other, points to the growing concentration of women in less-skilled database activities.

To get a better picture of the overall changes in the IT sector and its impact on women, it is important to analyse the trends in IT-related occupations. With the available NSS data, it is impossible to arrive at a definite estimate on the number of workers in the sector as it is difficult to segregate IT-related jobs from any of the given occupational categories. In this context, to roughly capture the various IT-related occupations, occupational categories which are prima facie associated to IT industry are analysed (Table 2).

The data show that during the period, the share of female workers has almost doubled. The largest shares of women workers are in occupational categories of stenographers and steno typists, card and tape punching operators (excluding stenographers) and computing machine operators, for both the years. However, the shares have increased substantially across the period and the highest increases are found in occupations such as system analysts and programmers. The substantial share of women in the categories of computing machine operators and system analysts and programmers—which are completely IT-linked—points to the trend of increased entry of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational category</th>
<th>1999-2000</th>
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<th>2004-05</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>System analysts and programmers</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>28.6</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(93.2)</td>
<td>(6.8)</td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
<td>(88.4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stenographers and steno typists, card</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>61.0</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>18.0</td>
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<td>and tape punching operators (excluding</td>
<td>(77.8)</td>
<td>(22.2)</td>
<td>(100.0)</td>
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<td>stenographers)</td>
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<td>33.1</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>53.5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(77.5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(86.50)</td>
<td>(13.50)</td>
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Note: Figures in parentheses are male-female shares to total.
Source: NSSO 55th and 61st Rounds.
women into these occupations. The distribution of workers across various occupational categories shows that the largest chunk of women is in the category computing machine operators, the share of which has increased from 36.2 per cent in 1999-2000 to 64.8 per cent in 2004-05. The data pertaining to 2004-05 indicate trends of concentration of women in the category of computing machine operators, which represents ITES occupations.

Apart from gender-wise patterns, the skewed nature of benefits across rural-urban areas and social groups is also a matter of concern in the context of employment in this sector, due to its potential to further aggravate the structural inequalities and hence gender divisions. Table 3 provides the rural/urban and social group-wise composition of workers in IT industrial categories.

A sharp rural-urban divide is visible in the distribution of IT employment, with urban areas accounting for over 90 per cent of total employment in the sector. This is particularly so in the case of women workers, with rural areas having a negligible share, though some improvements are visible over the periods. Across social groups too, the segregations are strong. One of the striking aspects is the increasing proportion of backward castes over the two periods, especially so in the case of women. With social restrictions likely to be much more stringent for women from upper castes, this pattern gives interesting insights on the interplay of caste and gender, which defines the pattern of employment in this modern sector.

On the whole, the analysis of the macro data reveals that there are clear signs of sex-based segregation and segmentation, though women are getting increased entry into the sector. The analysis also suggests that social exclusion along rural—urban locations and based on social categories are important issues in this sector. Such exclusions, along with gender divisions could lead to a skewed distribution of gains, eluding employment benefits to marginalised and disadvantaged segments of the society. Although the macro data provide insights on such broader trends and patterns, the dynamics of these larger structural issues are much more complex and critical, which demands detailed enquiry and analysis. These issues are further examined, in detail, in the subsequent case study of domestic call centre work.

III. COMPREHENDING DOMESTIC CALL CENTRE WORK

Regardless of a substantial spread of domestic call centre operations in the recent past, the conceptualisation of call centre work in India is overwhelmingly influenced by the image of work in international (offshored) operations. Accordingly, notions such as unearthly timing and rigid pattern of work organisation are still found dominating the discussions even in relation to the domestic sector. In view of this, to provide a background to the ensuing analysis, some elaboration of work in domestic call centres is attempted in this section. It is wrong to presume that all call
centres in the domestic sector as homogeneous entities. Firms do vary drastically in terms of their size, the type of processes being handled, work organisation, nature and status of technology used, and so on. The present analysis, based on a small sample of domestic call centres, thus, does not purport to provide a comprehensive picture of the complexities of the sector. Rather, it is an attempt to delineate some salient features and broader patterns.

By domestic call centres, we denote all those firms which cater to the business of domestic economy and deals with local customers. These firms can be owned by domestic enterprises, multinational corporations or transnational collaborative ventures. Therefore, it is not the ownership pattern but the sphere of operation of the firms that defines the sector. A major distinction of domestic call centres from their international counterparts is the medium of interaction itself. As the work demands good command over Hindi or local language only, it allows the participation of a vast majority of moderately qualified youth with a command over local language, thus, drastically redefining the composition and characteristics of workers vis-à-vis the employees in the international work. While the lower skill requirement of the sector offers an easy entry for the workers into the job, employers also find this as a boon as it helps them to easily draw and retain an adequate pool of agents, by offering much inferior salary packages. Given the present favourable situation of abundant supply of aspirants, the firms do not find any threat of attrition (employee turnover), which is the most worrying concern of HR managers in international business.

Another striking difference between domestic sector firms and international firms is related to the timing of work. While (due to geographical reasons) the workers in the international firms have to work during odd hours and with atypical timings, the workers in domestic call centres are predominantly working with normal working hours which compare very well with other firms and sectors in the domestic economy. As the firms mostly deal with domestic customers, it is natural that the services of call centres are required only till early hours of night. For instance, a firm dealing with telesales generally does not work after early night hours—as odd hours are considered inconvenient for customer canvassing. It is only in the case of a few helpline services, the workers may have to work in late night shifts. Here also as the call flow is comparatively low during late hours, the number of workers required is much lower vis-à-vis the staff strength during day time shift.

Unlike their counterparts engaged in international business, the domestic call centres are primarily based on voice-based operations. The striking absence of non-voice segment is primarily due to the profile of Indian customers, who are not largely internet savvy or computer literates. The voice-based centres can be further divided into firms dealing with inbound and outbound operations. In the case of inbound operations, agents attend to incoming calls and mostly deal with customer care operations (helpdesk, attending to enquiries, such as credit card operations, online trouble shooting, and so on). The major sphere of outbound operations is telesales, where the agents make phone calls to the customers as per the requirements of clients.

By the nature of work involved, inbound call centres require more knowledgeable workers, with some expertise in handling databases/computers. Accordingly, these centres are found engaging slightly more qualified or skilled workforce (for example, those with some hands on experience in computer or those who can handle databases). Due to this superior profile of work, the scope for learning and skill upgradation is often more in inbound work. While the intensity of work effort in inbound call centres is closely linked to the call flow (rate of incoming calls), in the case of outbound firms, the agents are found assigned with stringent, time-bound and multiple work targets (for example, in terms of number of calls to be made per day, number of ‘leads’ (successful calls) per day and the quantum of business to be done per month). Failure to meet...
targets often implies increase in daily working hours, reduction in salary/incentives and in a few cases, termination from the job. All these, obviously, make the work in outbound firms more stressful and demanding.

IV. GENDER DIMENSIONS OF DOMESTIC CALL CENTRE WORK

As part of the enquiry, in-depth interviews of 60 agents working in four domestic call centres situated in the National Capital Region (NCR) were carried out. Supplementary information was also gathered from 10 key resource persons including HR managers, consultants and recruitment agents in the sector. Of the 60 agents interviewed, 22 were women. Inclusion of both male and female employees in the survey was mainly for eliciting complementary (and sometimes conflicting) perceptions on the gender issues being intrigued. Based on the information provided by the respondents, it is estimated that, altogether, the four sample firms in the study engaged about 3800 workers at the agent level, of which, about 1500 (40.1 per cent) were women. The proportion of women workers was slightly higher in the outbound centres (45 per cent), compared to firms engaged in inbound work (33.3 per cent).

For the benefit of comparative analysis, two firms each were selected from inbound and outbound segments. These firms deal with a range of outsourced business processes catering to domestic economy and local customers. While the outbound firms are mostly into telesales (selling of credit cards, canvassing for insurance policies, opening bank accounts, and so on), the inbound centres mostly handle customer care operations (helpdesk, providing online information, and so on). All these firms are beginners in the field of domestic outsourced work and are with less than three years of experience. Except one firm, all other firms have more than one client (business provider) and thus handled different processes within the same work place.

In view of the pioneering and exploratory nature of the study, the interviews were done in an open ended, elaborative and repetitive mode to capture the various aspects of work and related issues. Specific efforts were made to gather overall information about the total workforce, their socio-economic backgrounds and to trace the distinct patterns in workforce composition, giving due attention to rural-urban and gender-wise disparities. Thus, the discussion that follows is more of broader trends and patterns pertaining to the overall workforce in the selected firms, than the case of 60 interviewees.

1. Profile of Respondents and Patterns of Workforce Participation

The agents were mostly below 30 years and unmarried. The average age of male respondents was 26 and for women, it was 23. While, the age of respondents ranged between 20 and 35, only two respondents were with more than 30 years of age. In terms of education, 63.3 per cent of respondents were graduates and the rest were with at least 10 + 2. The proportion of graduates was comparatively more for male respondents (76.3 per cent) than the female interviewees (40.9 per cent), clearly indicating the educational backwardness of women candidates at the entry level.

The overall educational profile is not very impressive as most of the interviewees did their schooling and even higher studies in Hindi medium either from schools/colleges located in rural areas/small towns or from government institutions in the NCR. Given, such a profile of educational attainments of the workers, the firms find it very easy to draw and maintain a workforce with lower salaries.

The nativity backgrounds of agents varied drastically across gender. More than 80 per cent of male respondents were from far off places (100 km and above) in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Bihar. Mostly, these workers migrated alone to the NCR in search of suitable jobs, after completion of their graduation. Familial and neighbourhood connections were
crucial in arranging initial place of stay and getting opening contacts in the urban set up. Many of them received some financial support, at the time of their leaving home and during their initial period of job search in the city. Quite contrary to this pattern of male respondents, the female workers largely (90.9 per cent) belong to NCR and nearby localities. While staying in rented accommodation (along with friends/room mates) is the predominant pattern among the male respondents, staying with own family or with close relatives is the dominant practice among female workers.

On the whole, the data suggest a rural-urban distinction in the participation of women, where mostly the young women from rural areas are found having very little access to the new economy jobs available in cities. While in the case of male workers, candidates from both the local and distantly placed regions are found having access to work in domestic call centres, there is a clear disadvantage for women from far off locations (rural set ups). Generally, the young women from rural or small town settings are found not getting the adequate social or familial support to move to urban centres and search for appropriate openings. In addition, the young men are found getting more exposure of the information society and new economy (such as computer literacy and information regarding new types of jobs, and so on). While the mobility of young men from rural areas to urban centres in search of job is normally considered a socially accepted deed, for the female youth such movements are often viewed as unwarranted and conforming to the accepted social norms. Social restrictions pose challenges to women at all stages of their migration. Unlike men, they are not free to travel alone to the city and stay with friends or distant relatives, and then search for the job. All these aspects, cumulatively, explain the lower participation of rural women (or women from far off locations) in the growing modern forms of work in urban centres.

The male respondents, belonging to rural areas or small towns are mostly from middle class backgrounds. The parents of these agents are mostly engaged in agriculture, petty business and, in some cases, government servants, teachers, clerks, etc. Most of them possess some land in the rural areas. In the case of female agents, the financial backgrounds of the families are mostly found at the low-income levels. The parents are engaged in a range of occupations including factory work, petty business, clerical jobs and support services in private sector. A social group-wise desegregation of the respondents suggests that a high proportion of male respondents belong to upper caste (89.5 per cent), followed by backward caste (7.9 per cent). For women respondents, the backward castes have an improved share (18.2 per cent), though upper castes are the dominant segment (81.8 per cent). Only one male respondent out of the 60 interviewed belongs to scheduled castes. The data thus suggest a strong degree of social exclusion, which underlines a highly skewed flow of employment benefits, favouring upper and backward castes.

Although a few male respondents had certain prior information regarding domestic call centres, most of them got the first information on their present occupation after reaching the city. Most of the male respondents entered the present work as their second or third job, after gaining some work experience in other related occupations (such as salesmen, computer operators, sales representatives, sales personnel in shops or smaller retail outlets, canvassing agents, and so on). Normally, after a short spell of their coming to the city they get to know about the opportunities in call centres and largely accessed the jobs through direct contacts or by appearing for walk-in-interviews of individual firms. In some cases, they also used referral mode, in which social contacts attained after reaching the city are central. In the case of women, a typical pattern of entry to the job is through kith and kin connections (including referral), as 63.6 per cent of female respondents told that they had some relatives of family members, who were known to some employees or HR personnel (in charge of recruitment) in these firms. In a few other cases, friends or relatives already working as agents informed them about the possible openings and helped them to follow up the
matter. Only in very few cases, the female respondents directly approached the firm and sought employment.

Unlike the male workers, most of the female agents (81.8 per cent) reported that this is their first employment, though some of them had engaged in some home-based subcontracted work or private tuitions before joining the call centres. Thus, though the male workers are new to the city, they had more working and job-seeking experience vis-à-vis the female employees. Many of the female agents opined that they feel the job less problematic as they got it through family involvement/connection. “Since my brother told me to join, I did not have to bother about getting consent of my parents. Had it been my own choice, it will mean a lot to convince my family and get the permission”. This response of the female worker was repeated by many others.

On the whole, it is quite apparent that compared to men, women face more challenges in entry into the occupation. The initial backwardness of women (in terms of computer literacy and lack of orientation apropos opportunities in the city) and social restrictions deter women’s mobility and entry into this occupation. Further, social considerations are critical as many labour market decisions of women agents are determined by familial and social priorities.

2. Gender-based Stereotyping and Division of Labour

Despite the fact that domestic call centres are hubs of new economy occupations, the gender-based stereotyping and division of labour followed in the sector are even comparable with the patterns of traditional workplaces. Firms entertain many of the conventional notions and gender-wise labelling while recruiting and employing workers in this sector. HR personnel and managers contacted during the survey are unanimous in their opinion that some gender considerations are crucial in the constitution and deployment of workforce. To them, ‘feminine’ qualities such as sweet voice, patience, perseverance, and so on are considered ideal for call centre jobs. Women are also considered aptly suited for carrying out monotonous work, besides possessing good qualities ideal for team work. “The outbound work is more appropriate to them [women] due to their advantages of ‘sweet voice’ and emotional approach. In most of the outbound processes you have to call a customer and convince ‘him’ to use a product or subscribe a card. This requires a psychological approach for which women are more suitable. We have seen that they can do the job much professionally than men – if they have the right qualities”, says an HR manager.

However, despite being stereotyped as feminine and women-friendly jobs, the occupation is still male dominated, due to non-availability of ‘ideally’ suited women candidates. To quote the words of a recruitment personnel: “It is true that women are ideally suited for the job and we want to recruit more women. But, it is very difficult to find ‘smart’ girls”. A closer analysis suggests that the apparent dearth of ‘suitable’ women candidates (for a sector which is actively looking for workers with ‘feminine’ qualities!) is cumulatively determined by a host of ‘social’ factors (such as backwardness of women in terms of skill possession; social/familial restrictions concerning their spatial mobility, and so on).

As per our estimate, even in outbound centres, which are actively looking for women agents, the proportion of women is only about 45 per cent. The data, thus, suggest that unlike the call centres in the West, ‘bottom rung’ occupations (of agents) are increasingly being feminised (Belt, 2004), the domestic call centres in India engage only a fewer proportion of women, due to the inherent inability of women to access these jobs due to a multitude of ‘social’ constraints. Given the absence ‘feminisation’ of jobs as such, the gender stereotyping in domestic call centres is more manifested in the emerging patterns of division of labour, allocation task and sharing of opportunities within the sector. Some of these aspects are discussed subsequently.
i. Increased Concentration in Outbound Work

The firms engaged in outbound processes showed a higher rate of women’s participation. An instant explanation for this pattern, provided by most of the key resource persons, is the ‘women-friendly’ nature of work in outbound call centres. It is generally highlighted that ‘feminine’ qualities (such as sweet voice, ability to cope up with emotionally demanding dull work, and so on) are most suited for outbound segment which is predominantly characterised by telesales. However, a detailed probing reveals that there are other reasons also. For instance, one male respondent pointed out that due to relatively lower salaries in outbound centres, male agents experience more compulsion to switch over to some other better paid jobs. To him, women (who are mostly local residents) could afford to continue, even with a lower salary as they are only supplementary income earners. To quote: “girls are mostly staying with their family or with relatives, they can adjust with this salary. In our case, we have to spend about half of our income on accommodation. So we will quickly switch over to some other occupation, which will provide a reasonable salary”. The seemingly higher attrition rates of male agents compared to female counterparts also substantiates this argument. As outbound call centres are generally characterised by monotonous and repetitive work with comparatively unimpressive salaries vis-à-vis the inbound firms, this higher concentration of women in outbound segment needs to be seen as a trend of marginalisation rather than feminisation. The skill upgradation prospects are also bleak in this segment, as the work does not imply much product expertise or use of computers or database management.

Varied explanations were given on their choice of and continuance in outbound work by women agents. While some of the respondents find the present job convenient due to ‘proximity to residence’, and ‘acceptable timing’, some others did not want to take the risk of shifting to another job which may be more demanding. In many cases, women often prefer to continue in the existing jobs due to personal and familial considerations, and are not keen to frequently shift jobs which may enhance their pay packages. Some of the respondents opined that unlike men they find it very difficult to frequently search, change and ‘experiment’ with jobs. To quote one such response, “Our aim is to find a job, which is conveniently located and acceptable by the family. Once you get it, the issue of salary becomes secondary”. Another respondent adds that, “unlike them (men) we are not free to roam around and search for better jobs”.

Further, in the absence of saleable skills and due to low levels of investment on improving hard skills (unlike male agents), it is not very easy for women workers to find better options. A few women respondents admitted that given their low-skill base, there is no alternative than continuing in the present work. “With my qualification [plus two], I do not think that I will get any better job”. The other possible jobs are sales positions at shops, factory work or lower level jobs at private firms. So, this is not a bad option for us”, opined one respondent.

ii. Allocation of Work and Sharing of Responsibilities

Gender-based stereotyping often influences the firm-level decisions concerning constitution of teams, allocation of work and sharing of responsibilities. Mostly, the team leaders in the selected firms are men. This pattern suggests that the leadership opportunities are skewly distributed in favour of male workers. As the team leader’s position demands flexible working hours and involves multiple tasks, it is often found labelled as ‘suitable for men’. “They [men] can run around, come very early in the morning or continue till late nights. We need not bother about how do they commute and when do they reach home. Also, they are more confident and comfortable to handle such tasks”, says a managerial staff supporting this gendered stereotyping.

Within the team also, the delegation of tasks are often as per gendered notions. The task sharing within teams in the outbound call centres provides a good example of the gendered division
of work. In many of the outbound call centres (involving telesales or canvassing business), the work is deployed to teams which have mostly male team leaders. Within the teams also, women agents are largely deployed in such processes that demand ‘feminine qualities’ such as ‘sweet voice’. While female members are mostly engaged in calling the customers and taking the ‘leads’, the male agents are engaged in subsequent follow up, such as collecting documents, address verification and other tasks which involves external visits. A few respondents also pointed out that the firms (especially those engaged in telesales) prefer more male members in their process team, as they are more ‘mobile’ and ideal for multiple tasks (including making calls, follow up, visiting the customers, and so on). One of the respondents reported that his selection to the job was largely on account of his willingness to do multiple jobs and the fact that he had a motorbike!

Such preconceived notions of ‘immobility’ and ‘inflexibility’ of women agents, based on social norms and gender stereotyping, were found leading to exclusion of women from the night shift operations. Barring one firm, which had few women agents during early morning or late evening shifts, none of the selected firms engaged women in night shifts (or during odd hours) since it was perceived as ‘troublesome’ and uneconomic proposition. To quote an HR personnel: “We have enough male staff and they are ready to work in night shifts as there is an incentive for them and the call flow is very low. Then why should we engage women and get into all risks. They have to be provided cabs, security and even we have to be cautious about their security within the company during odd hours. All these are ‘troublesome’ and thus we do not have any plan to engage women in night shifts”. Obviously, this exclusion of women workers from night shift has its implications in the recruitment pattern of the firms also. “We are keen on keeping a good stock of male agents, so that there are enough personnel to be deployed in night work. This will definitely compel us to reduce the proportion of women”, says an HR manager. The responses of women workers on this ‘exclusion’ from the night shift were mixed. Some of them believed that this exclusion is a denial of opportunity while some others considered that it is a blessing in disguise. Thus, from the discussion, it is evident that the gendered stereotyping at work delimits women’s scope in the workspace with women largely concentrated in certain defined processes which are low-skilled, with bleak career prospects.

3. Vertical Mobility and Career Progression

The field data suggest an increased likelihood for women call centre agents in the domestic sector to continue in their present position for longer periods. The lower proportion of women in the managerial or supervisory cadre also suggests that prospects for vertical mobility in the career path are relatively bleak for women vis-à-vis male agents. Unlike the male agents, women employees face more restrictions which are closely linked to social norms and familial considerations. Some of the female respondents do not even contemplate their long-term continuation in the work, as they treat the present job only as an interim engagement till their marriage. Convenience or suitability of the job ‘for the time being’ was the major reason cited for their choice and continuation. Due to this approach, a good chunk of women employees were not actively looking for promotion, especially when it implies a job shift (inter-firm movement).

In contrast to this, the male employees were found entertaining more ambitious plans as regards career upgradation, either in call centres or in similar occupations. Most of them wanted to build up their career in call centres itself, with many eyeing the international sector as their ‘ultimate’ destination. Moving into fairly paid sales positions in the retail sector (such as sales executives in shopping malls or showrooms of branded apparels, consumer goods, and so on)
was one of the other prospective avenues cited by some of the respondents. Positions in other hospitality sectors (such as receptionists in established hotels and sales positions in automobile sector) were also pointed out by a few respondents as future areas for job shift.

Promotional aspirations distinctly varied between those male and female agents, who seek their career progression within call centres. While male agents were eager to switch over to a better job available in another firm, the women were more inclined towards a promotion within the firm or a salary increase in the same position. Thus, while inter-firm or even inter-sectoral movement was aspired by male agents, intra-firm career upgradation was the preferred pattern among female agents. The enthusiasm with the male agents ‘to explore and experiment with new jobs’ was largely absent among women agents. Due to convenience factors and familial considerations, most of them did not want to disturb the status quo and were more or less satisfied with some upward mobility within their firms.

4. **Binding Social Restrictions Based on Patriarchal Norms**

Social restrictions and familial considerations overwhelmingly restrict the labour market decisions and overall approach of women towards work in the domestic call centre. Societal notions and household considerations were critical in all major work-related decisions right from their entry into work to their plans concerning career progression, mobility and exit. Thus, the participation and continuation of women even in the new generation works (such as call centres) adhere to traditionally and communally accepted behaviours. Most of the women agents reported that they had to perform several socially expected duties such as cooking and care of elderly, which is generally not the pattern vis-à-vis the male agents. Such familial obligations often inhibit their pursuits of higher education and skills, thereby adversely affecting their upward movement in the career ladder. As a female agent reports: “While we come back and cook, they [male agents] do not have any such responsibilities and are free to attend evening computer coaching classes. In our case higher study means pursuing BA or MA as correspondence students”.

Marriage is often viewed as the possible point of termination from the present jobs by many of the female respondents, where as most of the male members do not treat marriage as a decisive event in their labour market participation. The findings thus reiterate the observation of Mitter and Rowbotham (1995), highlighting the detrimental potential of social and biological roles of women in realising gender equality in the labour market.

The female agents are also found contributing more to the family income than the male workers. Most of the women respondents told that they give a considerable portion of their earnings to their parents or guardians with whom they are staying. “I give all my salary to Papa” was an oft-repeated response. Unlike many female agents only a small proportion of male respondents send money to their parents or family. While a major proportion of their income is spent on heads such as accommodation, food and entertainment, many also invest substantial amounts on their skill upgradation (computer training, English speaking courses, purchase of books and personal computer). The following was the explanation provided by a male employee in this regard: “They (female agents) are in a stable situation and have already reached their final point of acquiring a job and supplementing family income. For them, the next concern is marriage, which is a collective concern of the family as a whole. But in our case, in the next few years we have to build our career and earn a salary that is sufficient to run a family. That’s why we are investing more on education and personality development. Our parents also know this and thus do not expect much at this stage from our side”.

The fear of social sanction and familial intervention often influence the notions of work entertained by female agents. Given, the widespread ‘image’ attached to international call centre
workers by the orthodox society in urban centres, on account of their ‘socially unbecoming’ life styles and consumption patterns, many of the women agents had problems in accepting that they work in call centres. To circumvent this dilemma, many female agents related their work to the identities of the core companies, to which their call centres are catering to.22

V. CONCLUSION
Changes in the location, organisation and automation of jobs, which are made possible through information technologies, often lead to a complex interplay between labour market forces, technologies and gender relations. These interactions *inter alia* shape and reshape the patterns of women’s employment, by bringing in new avenues and novel forms of occupational segregations (Webster, 1996). With this perspective, the present case study examined the gender implications of employment in the emerging domestic outsourcing activities in India. The findings of the study highlight a general backwardness of women (especially those from rural and far off areas) to access the new economy occupations, such as domestic call centre work, in urban spheres. Social restrictions and familial considerations affect women’s spatial mobility, workforce participation and career progression. Further, the study reveals an overall backwardness of women in terms of low access to higher education and technological training which is again an outcome of the discriminatory social practices. Relatively lesser scope for skill upgradation and binding social restrictions were found reinforcing the backwardness of women, who eventually entertain no ambitious plans of upward vertical mobility in employment.

On the whole, the revelations of the study suggest that even the workplaces governed by new paradigms of production organisation and enabled by information technology are not essentially free from gender stereotypes and unequal gender relations. The findings also suggest that the mere participation in a modern sector occupation (such as call centre work) alone need not necessarily lead to empowerment or emancipation of women from the clutches of traditionally rooted social norms. On the contrary, even such occupations are built on the traditional structures of gendered divisions, reinforcing the marginalisation of women in the labour market.

Notes
1. For definitions of concepts such as offshoring, outsourcing and domestic sector outsourcing, see OECD (2007).
2. For a detailed account of growth in the domestic segment of India’s IT-ITES sector, refer to NASSCOM (2006).
3. Although the category of stenographers is excluded from the calculation, there are chances of over-estimation as there could be workers in other categories as well, who may not have anything to do with IT or related work.
4. As good command over English and exposure to Western ways of life are considered as essential qualifications in international call centres, the agents largely are well educated from public schools of metros and towns. Due to the highly paying and attractive nature of the job, a good proportion of the workers have impressive educational attainments and mostly belong to the creamy layer section of urban society (Remesh, 2004). As against this, to quote the words of an HR professional, “Any one, who could communicate forcefully and convince a local customer over phone, is an eligible candidate for the domestic call centre, where English-speaking is only an added advantage”.
5. Working in day-time and dealing with local population implies that workers do not experience much social isolation, unlike their counterparts in the international call centres. Further, there is no requirement of accent neutralisation or locational masking (through changed English speaking styles and use of pseudo names, and so on), which means a reduction in the training costs on these heads.
6. As per the available estimates around 20 per cent of international call centre operations in India deals with non-voice operations (attending and responding to internet/e-mail based queries).
7. Conformingly, a comparison of inbound and outbound centres (covered in the present study) suggests that duration of training and the allocation towards manpower upgradation is more in inbound centres.

8. The suitability of feminine skills in outbound work is an oft-cited reason for this higher proportion of women in outbound work. This aspect will be elaborated in a subsequent section.

9. Only six respondents, out of the 60 interviewees wrote their final examination (graduation or 10+2) in English.

10. While the initial salaries offered by the two inbound firms in the sample were Rs.5500 and Rs.6000, respectively, in the case of outbound firms, these were Rs.3000 and Rs.3500, respectively. The maximum salary reported for customer care operators (agents) in the inbound call centres is Rs.9000, while it is Rs.5000 for the outbound firms. Any cursory comparison of this salary structure with that of international call centres would reveal the strikingly lower payments in the domestic sector.

11. Most of the male respondents had some kind of prior knowledge in computer applications. While many of the urban male candidates had good exposure to computer operations, those from distant areas (small towns) also had some minimal previous exposure, which they expanded quickly after reaching the city by joining in short-term courses or working in related fields. However, in the case of women candidates, despite the fact that most of them are brought up in urban areas, prior hands-on experience on computers or related equipments was abysmally lacking.

12. To quote one response, “While men leave after 6-8 months, women generally stay for a year or two till they get married or when there is a shift of residence”.

13. Further, as explained earlier, the intensity of work in outbound centres is also more compared to inbound firms, on account of target-linked assessment of work.

14. A notion of empowerment was also found prompting these women agents to continue in low-paid outbound work, as most of them did not have any previous exposure to technology assisted work. As viewed by one interviewee, “Here we are dealing with computers and telephoning people. It is much better than working in a factory or taking up the job of sales girls in a costume shop”.

15. Only one out of the four selected firms is as an exception to this. In this firm the ‘Supervisor’ position (equivalent to team leader) had more women. Interestingly, in this particular firm, the beginning salary of the supervisor is at an alarmingly lower level, that is, Rs. 5000 per month, and the average educational qualification required was graduation.

16. To cite a typical comment, “Women are more effective in telesales as they can impress people and get the order form filled up quickly. The follow up afterwards is easy for men”.

17. To quote an ambitious female agent, “Even we can work at night. They [male colleagues] say that there is not much work pressure and there is ample time to relax. They even get a night allowance also. I do not mind coming for night shifts, if we are given cabs and security like the international BPOs. After all, it is fun and an opportunity to work in night shifts. It will also give us some experience which is useful in switching over to international BPOs”.

18. To quote a respondent: “My papa allowed me to work only because there is no night shift. Even I like this arrangement. I am back at home before dusk and I am not loosing my social life”.

19. However, a few respondents reported that they are keen to build up their career in the sector.

20. This tendency, along with conventional notions based on gender stereotyping that attach more managerial and capabilities to men compared to women, partially explains the current situation of lower presence of women in the category of team leaders or supervisors.

21. Similar findings are also reported by Upadhya and Vasavi (2006) in the context of IT workers in Bangalore.

22. Accordingly statements such as: “I work for ‘X’ bank”, “I deal with outbound work of ‘Y’ organisation, and so on, were the typical responses.

References


