

1 Introduction

For many young people, especially women, call-center work means money, independence, and an informal environment where they can wear and say what they like. Along with training in American accents and geography, India's legions of call-center employees are absorbing new ideas about family, material possessions and romance.

—*Wall Street Journal*, 2004¹

“Housekeepers to the World”—this headline gracing the cover of a 2002 issue of *India Today* was accompanied by an image of a woman wearing a headset.² Other reports that emerged at the same time suggested that these twenty-something “housekeepers” were trading in *salwar kameez*’s and arranged marriage for hip-hugger jeans, dating, and living “the good life.”³ The call center industry, with its relatively high wages and high-tech work environment, was heralded as a source of liberation for women.⁴

A closer look reveals a different aspect of the story. On December 13, 2005, Pratibha Srikanth Murthy, a twenty-four-year-old employee of Hewlett Packard, was raped and murdered en route to her night shift call center position in Bangalore. Reported by the *India Times* to the BBC and CNN, the Bangalore rape case attracted worldwide attention. Just two years prior, in December 2003, a speaker at the 2003 Women in IT Conference in Chidambaram, India, had reported that one of her employees in Chennai called her company’s New York office in a complete panic because the shuttle van used to transport employees during the night had been pulled over by the police. Despite having identity cards, the women were accused of prostitution. Global night shift labor was intersecting with the lives of women in ironic and unsettling ways.

In the late 1990s, Fortune 500 companies in the United States began moving customer service jobs to India because of the availability of an English-speaking population and lower wages than those paid to U.S. workers. Call centers fall under the umbrella of the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in India. Estimates suggest that approximately 470,000 people work in the industry, and it is currently the fastest growing sector in the nation.⁵

Due to the time difference between India and the United States, one of the primary requirements for employment in a transnational call center—besides fluency in English—is working the night shift.⁶ Typical night shift hours range from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. or 8 P.M. to 4 A.M. Mobility is vitally important to those who seek to work in this industry. In other words, *physical* mobility (getting to and from work) and *temporal* mobility (going out when one is expected to stay in) are job requirements. Because leaving home at night is generally considered inappropriate for and off-limits to Indian women, companies offer transportation as part of their recruitment strategy.

In this book I examine how women employed in the industry experience this rapidly expanding “second shift” in the global economy. During the course of research for this book it became evident that call center employment affects the lives of women workers in ways that run counter to standard expectations, such as the belief that when women are educated and earn a relatively high income, their status in a given society will be transformed for the better; and that as part of this transformation women will experience increased levels of independence and empowerment, such as substantive changes in the household (for example, men contributing equally to household labor) and the ability to come and go as they please. This has not necessarily been the case.

Instead, I argue, employment in this industry, particularly working at night, brings with it both new challenges and new opportunities for women workers. The notion of a woman’s “place” in the urban nightscape, which until now, for most women, has been characterized as “being safe at home,” is transforming as a result of the night shift requirement in the BPO industry. My research for this book was shaped by three broad, interconnected questions related to this transformation: (1) How does the demand for night shift workers recodify women’s physical and temporal mobility? (2) How does call center employment translate into social and economic mobility? and (3) What spatial and temporal barriers do women face, both in the household and in urban public space, as a result of BPO employment? In-depth qualitative

analysis revealed that the answers to these questions are by no means unified and singular, because of a variety of factors such as age, economic status, and living situation (that is, whether married, single, living alone, living with parents or within a joint family).

For the most part, educated, middle-class women working in call centers are earning an income that far exceeds what they could previously earn. Proponents of the industry believe this serves as a catalyst for empowering women. Yet no one has considered whether increased income and education mean that women experience expanded physical and temporal mobility (that is, are now able to go out, day or night, as freely as their male counterparts). Thus, underlying *Working the Night Shift* is concern about whether women continue to face strict regimes of surveillance and control of their physical and temporal mobility, despite increased income and education, and what this tells us about power and dominance in a given society.

Spatializing the Night

Social science tends either to ignore space completely, to view it as merely a container of difference, or to conceptualize it as “dead,” absolute, or neutral.⁷ According to Fincher and Jacobs, this framework is problematic because class and gender differences are “experienced in and through place.”⁸ Thus geographers are on the forefront of illustrating that space matters, particularly in terms of the social construction of identities.⁹

For instance, Dalits, also called untouchables or the backward caste, were barred from entering Hindu temples because of the low status assigned to them by society.¹⁰ Likewise, in many Hindu temples, the body of a menstruating woman is considered dirty.¹¹ Menstruating women are forbidden to enter because it is believed they will contaminate the perceived sanctity and purity of this sacred space. In this context, a temple is far from a neutral space. It marks people as pure or impure, as compatible with the sacred or essentially profane. Who belongs in a temple is determined by multiple categories such as age, gender, religion, and class.

Similarly, the nightscape is not a static geographic or temporal landscape. It is a dynamic space with a spatiality that is different from the day. Who belongs out at night and who does not is similarly determined by multiple categories such as gender, class, age, and religion. Areas perceived as safe during the day transform into spaces of danger at night, and stories about the dangers of going out at night are used to control women’s mobility. As a result, women

who break the rules about their place are viewed as “asking for it” if they meet with violence, even rape, when they go out at night.

The conception of space as interrelational is illustrated in the view of women as both a site and a source of contamination. As global customer service workers, women must now traverse the nightscape. As a result of this relocation, perceptions about women’s place in society also have the potential to be transformed. As the research in this book illustrates, however, generally speaking “women of the night” continue to be viewed as loose, bold, and mysterious. In some instances a woman is assumed to be a prostitute, transformed symbolically by time and space into “a dirty girl.” Just as women supposedly bring contamination to sacred sites because they are, at certain times of the month, out of *place*, they are also, at certain *times* of the day, out of place simply by leaving the home.¹² The profane space of the street, particularly at night, contaminates women’s bodies just as the sacred space of the temple is contaminated by women’s blood. This reflects how flows of the body (that is, moving about) and flows from the body (that is, menstruation) are spatialized in a variety of ways.

When women leave their homes or migrate from their villages, the act of “stepping out” can place them in positions of experiencing disdain, and possible violence, even when the act of stepping out is done for the good of their families and society. In Dhaka, Bangladesh, for instance, migrant women working at night in export-oriented garment factories experience hostility and abuse both inside the factory and when they travel to and from work.¹³

The violence these workers face when they are out at night includes verbal harassment from male supervisors, such as “Daughter of a whore, why don’t you work? You can die for all I care, but you have to finish your work”; rape, both inside and outside the factory; and the very real threat of assault and kidnapping.¹⁴ The independence of earning their own money and living away from the family unit is viewed as a threat to the urban, male order. As Siddiqi aptly points out, “Symbols of inverted moral order, women workers signify through their bodies male inadequacies and national failure.”¹⁵ In addition, society relegates female garment workers to a low-class status, and the factories they work in are sometimes referred to as whorehouses and baby-producing centers.¹⁶ This low-class status combined with working at night renders garment workers extremely vulnerable. They are perceived to be indecent women because they are out of place. At the same time, the local government provides little intervention or protection to garment workers. This

is especially ironic given that their labor serves as the primary contributor to foreign exchange income and is a key benefit to the government in the form of economic development.

Barring women from sacred spaces because their bodily functions are viewed as dirty and attacking women workers who labor at night are just two examples of the restrictions and challenges women face when they venture outside the home. As some women gain increased access to night spaces outside the household, their experiences are further complicated as their bodies become imbued with stereotypes of sexual impropriety, questionable moral values, and “bad character.”

Why Do Physical and Temporal Mobility Matter?

The ability and freedom to drive a car, traverse the urban nightscape, and explore neighborhoods beyond the confines of one’s community speak volumes in terms of gender equality. Massey’s seminal work on space, place, and gender finds that “the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people.”¹⁷ Hägerstrand also points out that “one individual’s use of his freedom influences what other individuals are able to do with theirs.”¹⁸ Although they are often overlooked, physical and temporal mobility, or the lack of them, provide an important perspective in terms of understanding which groups or individuals hold domain over certain spaces and which groups do not.

Studies on women’s mobility are conducted in a variety of settings as scholars seek to understand how mobility shapes their lives.¹⁹ From Worcester, Massachusetts, to Porto Novo, Benin, West Africa, a lack of mobility impacts women’s access to education and job opportunities.²⁰ Sujata, a fifty-eight-year-old woman I interviewed one sunny afternoon in San Antonio, Texas, described growing up in her small town in the state of Gujarat, India. She was not allowed to leave home after 6 P.M. As a child, she wanted to participate in sports that were offered to girls but was forbidden because she would not be home by the curfew imposed on her. She recalled that restrictions on her mobility undermined her ability to compete with her fellow students as she grew older. She remarked that “the bitterness still remains” as she looks back on her childhood. Sujata made it a point to tell me that she would ensure that her daughters not experience the same confinement in their lives.

Mobility reflects more, however, than the physical act of walking or driving from point A to point B. Paromita Vohra’s 2006 documentary, *Q2P*, provides an important perspective on how physical and temporal mobility, toilets, and

health are intertwined.²¹ By examining women's access to toilets in Mumbai, she revealed how the lack of public toilets combined with societal rules about where women are expected to relieve themselves hinders women's mobility. Vohra also linked the lack of access to toilets to ongoing health problems that women face, such as urinary tract infections.

Going to the bathroom is a fundamental issue for women in Mumbai because many lack toilets in their homes but are still expected to relieve themselves incognito. Under these conditions, women will hold off going to the bathroom until nightfall so as not to be seen. They also walk far distances to access a place to urinate away from the view of men, or they try to stay near areas that provide them access to a toilet. Poor women, especially, bear the brunt of this situation.²² Even women who have toilets in their homes are aware of how long they can be gone from home before the need to go to the bathroom arises, and how this need can be satisfied. Often it's a choice between relieving oneself in a tucked-away public space or enduring physical pain.

In comparison, men have the privilege of urinating in public spaces, such as in street gutters and on the road. Women walking by are expected to turn away and pretend not to see. It is out of the question for women to behave in a similar manner. "It would be chaos!" is how one man in Vohra's film responded to the idea. This dynamic illustrates how men hold dominion over public space. It also shows one graphic way in which male behavior in public space is used to define gendered perceptions of mobility and spatial access. As a result, women modify their actions in order to respect a man's need for privacy in public spaces. Women are treated as an *intrusion* in the male domain of public spaces and they hide themselves as a means to justify their existence outside the household.

During a discussion I had with Madhusree Dutta, filmmaker of *7 Islands and a Metro*, she concurred with Vohra's film, adding, "If you want to increase women's social mobility, make more public toilets available."²³ As a means of addressing concerns about women's safety, Dutta also pointed to the current trajectory of increasing the presence of female police stations. These stations are generally staffed by female officers and serve as a place for women to lodge criminal complaints. She believes, however, that public toilets would be more effective in addressing safety concerns because women would no longer have to go into dark, faraway spaces to relieve themselves. Providing public toilets

would not only increase women's mobility but also help to integrate them into mainstream spaces.

Shilpa Ranade's work on gender and space in Mumbai provides an additional perspective.²⁴ By mapping women's mobility in four public spaces of Mumbai, she illustrates not only how gender segregation is spatialized, but also how a woman's access to public space intersects with maintaining a particular reputation. The areas she mapped were (1) Central Avenue, Chembur, a suburban middle-class neighborhood; (2) Zaveri Bazaar and Mumbadevi, dense, commercial areas in old southern Mumbai; (3) Nariman Point, a commercial district of South Mumbai; and (4) Kalachowki, a working class neighborhood. By mapping women's mobility in these diverse settings, Ranade found that men have almost free access to public space whereas women self-regulate their physical and temporal mobility in order to (re)produce respectability:

Women cross the road between one to four times to avoid situations in which they might find themselves uncomfortable/unsafe. This is sometimes done indirectly by producing respectability such as when a woman crosses the road to avoid a wine shop. At other times, it is direct such as when she crosses to the other side to avoid groups of men hanging out at the *paan* shop, or when she chooses not to walk between trucks and a dead wall. (The working class drivers [of these trucks] in this case are regularly perceived as threatening.)²⁵

If women dodge streets and avoid dead walls during the day, what happens at night?²⁶ In the course of the study from which this book grew, it became apparent that one of the ways in which women produced respectability in the nightscape was to be in the presence of a man and to adhere to a strict work-to-home journey. This does not mean, however, that there were not instances in which women would "bunk off" (take a day off from work) to hang out. Yet it was made clear during interviews and participant observation, and through my own experience, that women, compared to men, are held to far stricter rules of mobility in terms of where they can move in the urban nightscape.

Theoretical Overview

The research for this book is informed by feminist literature on the public versus private sphere. I draw from this literature because it provides a foundation for looking at how women experience inequality in a variety of settings, ranging from gender relations in the household to their participation in the

paid labor force. Notions of public and private are generally viewed through the lens of the home as the private sphere and spaces outside the home as the public sphere, or the lens of business as a private sphere and government as a public sphere. These structural conceptions, problematic as they may be, are in turn embedded in the body. To articulate how the distinction between public and private spheres is embodied and subsequently used to socially construct women as inherently different from men, I also draw from literature on body politics.

Public Versus Private

The distinction between the public and private spheres gained popularity in the 1970s as a means to explain a woman's place, or lack thereof, in society.²⁷ As illustrated in Table 1, women were relegated to private sphere traits and men were relegated to public sphere traits.

According to feminist scholar Spike Peterson, in the 1980s feminist political theorists in the West began to move away from this distinction because the notion of the public sphere shifted and was used to describe the state government while the private sphere moved into the realm of business.²⁸ Scholars from a range of disciplines have gone on to critique the use of this distinction. Its binary nature (that is, one is either dependent or independent on the basis of the sphere to which one is relegated), for example, fails to consider difference and overlap at the individual level.²⁹ Although it is important to understand how the perception of a woman's place (that is, in the home) reflects her overall status in society, the public-private framework mirrors the belief that women and men actually belong in distinct categories.³⁰ Indeed, as demonstrated by the popularity of books that perpetuate sexist beliefs about masculinity and femininity, such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, the illusion of separate spheres certainly remains real and relevant in the lives of men and women, despite the fact that there is difference and overlap at the individual level.³¹

When a man says, "My wife will stay at home because we can afford to have her at home," certain assumptions related to the public versus private distinction are revealed. Although gender is in fact fluid and interrelational—some men have traits that are deemed feminine and some women have traits that are deemed masculine—public versus private traits are constructed as real. The relegation of women to private spaces appears to be a privilege of the upper class and a prerogative of men.