

Cabs, male drivers and midnight commuting: manufacturing respectability of the unmarried women agents of call centers in India

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Abstract The present paper discusses the role of cabs and the presence of other men in the cab in manufacturing respectability for the unmarried women agents of call centers in India. The night shift, an intrinsic part of work, at call centers in India demands mobility and access to public space during nights for its women employees. The paper elaborates how the relation between gender and space is evolving in the backdrop of the presence of someone trusted, through a shift from private patriarchy to public patriarchy for the women agents while accessing the public space. The paper is based on a total of sixty-one qualitative interviews conducted with unmarried women call center employees and parents based in Gurgaon, India.

Keywords Gender · Public space · Trust · Respectability · Witnessed presence · Call center agents · India

1 Introduction

The rape and murder of a woman call center employee in Bangalore in 2005 received media attention worldwide (The Times of India 2010). Though the cab driver was convicted in October 2010, the crime raised questions about the trustworthiness of the transportation provided by call center organizations to its employees. The night shift work of call centers in India demands mobility and access to public space for its employees as they need to be outside

their homes during the night. Night shift work, especially when it goes tragically wrong, illustrates the relation between space and gender and how it shapes the concerns and values placed upon women.

The employment of unmarried women in call centers is being accepted, despite being predominantly a night shift job, and its consequent changes in control over women's mobility in India. The number of women who are employed in the call centers, and traversing the urban space in night, is significant in number. This underlines the need to examine the negotiations made by these women and their parents in developing trust toward mobility of the women agents in the night hours. Apart from providing employment opportunities to women, the information and communication technology (ICT) industry has to address the logistics of transporting women agents during night hours. Extant literature on call centers concentrates on issues related to labor processes, health and gender discrimination within the boundaries of the organization (for instance, Ng and Mitter 2005; Remesh 2004), but understanding of the role played by the transport facilities to the unmarried women agents is inadequate. The present paper attempts to fill this gap through qualitative interviews conducted with unmarried women call center agents and some of their parents. It especially focuses on cabs and cab mates (driver, security guard and male colleagues) as witnesses to the social processes happening during the night hours. The transport facilities provided by the call center are able to instill trust among the parents of the women agents due to the presence of others in the cabs who witness the actions of cab mates as well as the action of people outside the cab.

Apart from using relevant literature on public space and manufacturing respectability, the paper supplements the understanding using Nevejan's YUTPA framework (for

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