

## Book Review

Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010, 191 pp., \$60.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 331.48138114220854-dc22

**Regina M. Hechanova**  
rhechanova@ateneo.edu  
Associate Professor,  
Department of Psychology  
Ateneo de Manila University  
Katipunan Road, Loyola  
Heights  
Quezon City, Philippines

### Regina M. Hechanova

For almost one year, Reena Patel lived among, talked to, and observed call center workers in Mumbai, India, and from this fieldwork, she wrote *Working the Night Shift: Women in India's Call Center Industry*. Her book, informed by a feminist perspective, focuses specifically on issues of mobility and inequality. It also provides a fascinating picture of the experiences of women workers and the evolving images of "pink collar" work in a growing sector of India's changing economy.

From the perspective of ICTD, the author's research highlights how information and communication technology has enabled the outsourcing of work to such developing countries as India. Currently the call center industry employs half a million workers and is the fastest-growing industry in India. Its economic benefits are apparent: Patel documents how the higher wages that workers earn in call centers enable them to help their families, as well as improve their own financial independence and quality of life.

More nuanced are Patel's insights into the noneconomic changes brought by the industry. For some women, call center work has been a form of liberation, allowing them to break stereotypes of women as housewives. Other workers view call center work as a window to a more diverse world, offering what the author terms "social crossings," spaces that allow for numerous interactions with individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Further, call center workers perceive the language skills and training they obtain as valuable preparation for more global careers.

Patel's strongest critiques identify a set of "dark sides" to call center work that impact the women involved. Women who work at night face threats to their safety, their reputations, and to their connections to family and friends. Working at night is risky. Though rare, Patel offers accounts of women being accosted, raped, and robbed. Also, against a background of a conservative and traditional society, she describes how some in India view women who work the nightshift as hookers, or "bad girls"—a view exacerbated by stories about casual hook-ups in call centers. Thus, call center work has elicited parental disapproval, with Indian parents decrying that any association with the industry decreases their daughters' marriage prospects.

Patel describes the isolation of night work. Given the late night/early morning hours, workers find themselves cut off from their normal social circles and activities. Because of this isolation, social and even romantic relationships tend to be formed among peers. For those workers with families, night work also poses challenges to fulfilling one's familial obligations. The author notes that economic equality has not resulted in equality

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of gender roles; the burdens of running a household and raising children still fall squarely on the shoulders of women.

All in all, *Working the Night Shift* paints a picture of the gains and costs of call center work in a developing Asian context. It is interesting to note that earlier research on the Philippines call center industry shows similar benefits: economic empowerment, diversity, and global exposure. Some challenges are common as well: safety risks, social isolation, harmed reputation, and family conflict (Hechanova, 2010). Both studies suggest that night work conflicts with social norms, but in different ways. In India, night work impacts women's suitability for marriage, while in the Philippines, the 24/7 nature of the industry has disturbed cultural norms, particularly those related to observance of religious rites and family celebrations (Hechanova, 2012). As suggested by Mirchandani (2004), call center workers in graveyard shifts become "detached from the spaces of social life such as markets, households and transportation links, which occur only during the day" (p. 365).

Patel's book is written from a sociological and anthropological lens. She is honest about her reflexivity and her feminist and American orientation. Readers need to keep in mind that, despite her months of immersion and Indian heritage, Patel's observations are not those of an insider. The author is also forthcoming about her mainly female sample. It would have been interesting to find out if men working in call centers share the same views about the industry as those of women workers.

Call center managers and human resource practi-

tioners looking for advice on how to work with and retain female workers may be disappointed. Patel does not provide solutions to the issues that she presents, so those who supervise or interact with female call center workers will need to derive their own conclusions from the findings.

However, those who seek an understanding of the world of women in the call center industry will find this book fascinating. Readers will find rich descriptions of the experiences of a number of Indian female workers. Patel's research could also be important for policy makers, as it provides a valuable counterweight to the global enthusiasm for outsourcing. *Working the Night Shift* underscores the tensions, challenges and opportunities facing the women who choose to pursue this work, even as many developing countries turn to outsourcing to boost their economies. Specifically, the book reveals the struggles of women caught in the crossfire of tradition and modernity and for whom technology is a double-edged sword. ■

## References

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