

# Journal of Global Analysis

Women Labour in Call Centres:  
Understanding Characteristics of Work

By Gulden Dursun\* & Hale Butun Bayram\*\*

## Abstract

This paper is concerned with the work experiences of women employees in info-service-based offices as telephone call centres. Call centres have grown rapidly in Turkey in recent years, creating a large number of new jobs. In particular, it is concerned with the question of whether call centre jobs are offering women new opportunities for career progression, or whether a more common bias is taking place in which women are being drawn into highly routinized jobs. The collection of data was carried out sourcing a heterogeneous plurality of instruments. Our research confirms that work processes in call centres are close association of surveillance technologies (technologic panopticon), exploitation and high levels of discipline, highly repetitive and heavily monitored, and that the association with the assembly line and Taylorism have dominated much of the rhetoric on call centres. In addition, we have observed that, the structure of women's employment in the call centre industry tends to polarise.

**Keywords:** Call centres, women labour, electronic panopticon, Taylorism, characteristics of work

JEL: J81

*Kocaeli University,  
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Turkey  
E-mail: [gultendursun@hotmail.com](mailto:gultendursun@hotmail.com)*

*Kocaeli University,  
Golcuk Vocational School, Turkey  
E-mail: [halebutun@hotmail.com](mailto:halebutun@hotmail.com)*

- \* Gülten DURSUN is an Assistant Professor at Kocaeli University, Turkey focusing on economic growth and foreign direct investment in Turkey. Her articles appeared in various journals, including Marmara Journal of European Studies and The Journal of Knowledge Economy and Knowledge Management.
- \*\* Hale BUTUN BAYRAM is an Assistant Professor at Kocaeli University, Turkey focusing on statistical analyses and management sciences. Her articles are published in various journals. His research interests and publications are in the fields of critical studies in management. She is a Director of The Department of Vehicle and Transportation Technologies.



# Women Labour in Call Centres: Understanding Characteristics of Work

## Introduction

Call centres in Turkey have developed rapidly over the last fifteen years compared to many other countries. Call centres provide an important source of employment for women in most of the countries. They are defined as offices providing remote Telesales, telemarketing and information services.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning, the feminization of increasing employment with the manufacturing industry has gradually expanded in the fields requiring mainly call centres and data input along with the internationalization of the service sector.<sup>2</sup> The call centre business is one that provides the services offered face to face in the past through telephone and computer systems with the development of information and communication technologies since the mid-1980s. The studies revealed that 70% of the total number of employees working in call centres are women. This is because women have high social and emotional skills and they work at low wages and have flexible hours, more women are employed in this field.

The lack of studies conducted in Turkey regarding the role and position of women in this rapidly-growing sector is remarkable. This new service sector draws attention since it is seen to focus on the "Taylorist" work method on one hand and "technological panopticon" on the other hand, because of women's status as "modern slaves", their working conditions and their being unorganized. This study aims to find evidence supporting this hypothesis. The basis of study is to investigate characteristics of work for women call centre workers. More specifically, this study addresses four main questions: Are call centres a new job process offering a career opportunity to women? Or is it one of the highly routinized businesses? How does the continuous supervision mechanism affect call centre employees? Do call centre employees develop any type of resistance during this process? All these questions will be provided with probable answers and some directions for future research will also be proposed.

The study has three parts. Following the discussion about "Taylorism", and "Technological Panopticon" work methods presented after the introduction part; the changing situation of the service sector taking examples from call centre activities and women labour will be discussed, and the analysis conducted will be presented. The findings will be evaluated in the concluding part.

## Approaches Towards Understanding Labour Processes in Call Centres

Call centres began to take place in the centre of the discussions related to economical geography, labour markets, business organization and women studies in academic literature.

1. Ranald Richardson and J. Neill Marshall, "The Growth of Telephone Call Centres in Peripheral Areas of Britain: Evidence from Tyne and Wear", *Area*, Vol. 28, No 3, 1996, p. 308.
2. Marcela Miozzo and Luc Soete, "Internationalization of Services: A Technological Perspective", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 67, No 2-3, 2001, p. 159-185.

The Call centre sector is defined as one of the labour intensive sectors, of which most of its employees are not qualified; also at the same time have low wages. Call centres mainly reflect the approach of mass production to its customer services.<sup>3</sup> The main distinctive property of such a study is that call activities of employees are monitored by a means of Automatic Call Distributer (ACD) system during their working hours. This system determines the time at which employees are included in the system and whether they make any calls when they are in the system. It then allows for inbound calls or outbound calls to be routed to the first free agent. Therefore, employees do not have a time break between two calls. All employees, except those having a break are on the phone during their 8 hours of work. When this situation tagged "low discretion, high commitment" is considered in terms of management strategies, it indicates tension arising from a conflict between service quality and efficiency provided for customers. This tension between control and loyalty has been the issue of various studies regarding call centre practices.

### **"Electronic Panopticon" Approach to Call Centres**

The concept of "Electronic Panopticon"<sup>4</sup> was first used by Fernie and Metcalf while evaluating the labour processes evident in call centres.<sup>5</sup> Panopticon, which was suggested as an ideal prison model by Jeremy Bentham, a philosopher, 200 years ago, was then named by Foucault, a historian/philosopher as "a cruel, ingenious cage".<sup>6</sup> Foucault defines it as an instrument of disciplinary application and a means of defining power relations in daily life. According to Fernie and Metcalf, Bentham's Panopticon model showed by Foucault for the workplace application is an archetypical organization for call centres.<sup>7</sup> With regard to these authors, the employees under continuous surveillance in call centres carry out their duty without external pressure even if they are not monitored after a while, since they think they are being monitored.<sup>8</sup>

Electronic panopticon is the internalization of power relations and the fulfilment of behavioural rules determined by employers without any pressure. Employees know that they are continuously monitored just as it is in panopticon type prison. All transactions carried out through the ACD system can be electronically observed in details and recorded. Fernie and Metcalf argue that perfection in the management processes will be provided and performance evaluation can be carried out via computer surveillance monitors.<sup>9</sup> Electronic panopticon provides call centre managers with "full control".<sup>10</sup> Such a full control mechanism is important

3. Rosemary Batt, "Work Organization, Technology, and Performance in Customer Service and Sales", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol 52, No 4, 1999, p.539-564; Maeve Houlihan, "Tensions and Variations in Call Centre Management Strategies", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2002, p. 67-85.
4. "Bentham envisioned the Panopticon as consisting of a central watchtower surrounded by a circular row of cells permanently exposed to the unseen inspector in his lodge" Afrouz Yari and Shahram Afrougheh, "Franz Kafka's The Castle: A Foucaultian Reading", *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, Vol. 1, No 3, 2013, p. 63-67; and for a detailed description of the Panopticon, see Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary*, Clarendon Press, 1993.
5. Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, "(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops", *Centre for Economic Performance London School of Economics and Political Science WP*, No 390, 1998, p. 2.
6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977.
7. Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, *op. cit.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, *op. cit.*, p.9.
10. Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, "Ricky Don't Lose That Number...Payment Systems, Monitoring Systems, Monitoring and Performance in Call Centres", *Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics WP*, No 1047, 1999, p. 14.



in terms of economical performance of these call centres. Bain and Taylor criticize the approach of “electronic panopticon” from two aspects.<sup>11</sup> Firstly, this approach suggests an insufficient framework with regard to the simplification of labour processes in call centres. Secondly, this approach underestimates a possible potential to resist and even make a possible resistance impossible due to “full control”.

### ***“Taylorist” Approach to Call Centres***

Taylorism resulted from the works of “scientific revolution” in the capitalist production organization conducted by Frederick Taylor in USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Taylor, with an approach he developed in his work titled “Principles of Scientific Management” in 1911, had an influence on the organization and control of capitalism during the labour process. Taylorism provides a structure aiming to establish a performance-based wage system, and eliminate all the elements causing loss of time by increasing work division in production and an increased work performance. In other words, the basic factors of cognitive management include division of work units, standardization and increasing productivity.

According to Taylor, an employee’s greatest obstacle is “natural laziness”. More importantly, it is the process of “systematic soldiering” which is a conscious behaviour carried out by employees, thereby trying to hide the actual duration of their work.<sup>12</sup> Taylor argues that what lies behind these behaviours of employees is the thought of a conflicting interest with their employers, but both parties would be able to gain the highest possible profit with the implementation of the “principles of scientific management”.<sup>13</sup> As for the control issue, it was argued that a good management must be able to dictate to its employees the best possible means of carrying out their tasks.

The call centre business in existing literatures is defined as a combination of Taylorism, emotional labour and supervision mechanism.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, call centres which includes a new style in customer relations are known as stressful workplaces due to information technology.<sup>15</sup> Many researchers indicated that the thesis stating Taylorism as a type of production organization had important resources which explain labour processes in call centres.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, “labour processes in call centres represent a new development in the Taylorisation process of the white collars”.<sup>17</sup> When the nature of work type is properly examined, the labour supervision style Taylorism describes to be valid. When a typical call centre employee logs into the system, he/she is identified by the system and starts to work and gets 30 calls per hour on average. An important point here is the control of employees’

- 
11. Peter Bain and Phil Taylor, “Entrapped by the ‘Electronic Panopticon’ Worker Resistance in the Call Centre”, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol 15, No 1, 2000, p. 1-17.
  12. Frederick W. Taylor, *Shop Management*, New York and London: Harper&Brothers&Publishers, 1911, p. 32-33.
  13. Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Five Edition, USA: Greenwood Press, 1977, p. 10.
  14. J. Wickham and G. Collins, “The Call Centre: A Nursery for New Forms of Work Organisation?”, *The Services Industry Journal*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2004, p. 1-18.
  15. Fernie and Metcalf, 1998, *Op. cit.*
  16. Gloria Lankshear et al., “Call Centre Employees’ Responses to Electronic Monitoring: Some Research Findings”, *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 15, No 3, 2001, p. 595-605; Michael Fisher, “The Crisis of Civil Service Trade Unionism: A Case Study of Call Centre Development”, *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 18, No 1, 2004, p. 157-177; Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, “An Assembly Line in the Head’: Work and Employee Relations in the Call Centre”, *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 30, No 2, 1999, p. 101-117; Peter Bain et al., “Taylorism, Targets and the Pursuit of Quantity and Quality by Call Centre Management”, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 17, No 3, 2002, p.170-85.
  17. Peter Bain et al. *Op. cit.*, p.172.

work rhythms, the people they talk to, the words they use during the calls and their break times by the ACD system. In this sense, call centres “with major reference to management in the past, explains the final point of efforts casted while separating work units.”<sup>18</sup> The ACD System allows for inbound or outbound calls to be routed to the first free agent. Employees do not have a time of rest between two calls. Therefore, they are on the phone during their 8 hours of work all thanks to the ACD system. Another characteristic of the ACD system is the standardization of the content of the phone calls. When the employees have a call or make a call, they enter the necessary information found on their screen in the standardized phone calls.

The division of job into small pieces, standardization of the procedures and supervision process in the call centres provide an advantage. By making the procedures simpler, the management eliminates the burdens such as qualified staff recruitments and in-service trainings. However, high employment circulation is an acceptable situation due to difficult working conditions.

### Call Centres and Gender

One of the issues reflecting the basic characteristic of today’s knowledge-based society is the feminization of labour force. Capitalist production needs more cognitive capacity and brain power (mass intelligence) when compared to the past. Money, information and people move around the world very fast.<sup>19</sup> Harvey expresses this situation as “time and place compression” whereas McDowell<sup>20</sup> says “factories, goods and labour seemed to have melted into air or, more prosaically, into the glass fiber cables of telecommunication.” The nature of Post-Fordist study prefers a big skill pool (non-manual skills) and women labour flexibility. In fact, “workforces are offered up to the international capitalist as educated, liable and compliant ‘social capital’.”<sup>21</sup> For example, one reason for the feminization of labour in England in 1980s was the belief that women had the social skills required by the employers in the service-based economy.<sup>22</sup> Particularly, “interactive services” are major fields that require face to face or voice communication with people. The main point to be emphasized is that these services are the ones that require expertise and the principles of the Taylorist method are used.

Call centres became feminized from the beginning as a new style of workplace during the change in service processes. The evidence obtained by means of the qualitative method show that most of the employees in this sector are women and this situation is not coincidental.<sup>23</sup> It is due to a conscious recruitment strategy. It is assumed that social and communicative skills women have can be used to manage the labour process. Behavioural characteristics such as patience, empathy and emotional labour are more natural characteristics of women as against that of men.<sup>24</sup> De-skilled Tayloristic factory conditions of the business organization which is

---

18. James Wickham and Gráinne Collins (2004), “The Call Centre: A Nursery for New Forms of Work Organisation?”, *The Services Industry Journal*, Vol. 24, No 1, p. 3.

19. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Pub, 1989, p. 285.

20. Linda McDowell, *Capital Culture, Gender at Work in the City*, Blackwell Pub., 1997, p. 1.

21. Ronaldo Munck, *Globalization and Labour: The New ‘Great Transformation’*, Zed Books, 2002, p. 66.

22. Vicki Belt et al., “Women, Social Skill and Interactive Service Work in Telephone Call Centres”, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 17, No 1, 2002, p. 20-34.

23. Vicki Belt, “A Female Ghetto? Women’s Careers in Call Centres”, *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2002, p. 51-66.



fully monitored were first used conceptually by Stanworth.<sup>25</sup> Labour turnover in this sector is quite high and women are able to transfer the natural skills they have. Qualifications like time management, multiple business order, international business experience, communication, performances in mutual interviews are among the transferable experiences. Women face a lot of obstacles in progressing in their careers except for being a team leader. Vicki Belt said that call centres, one of the businesses using information and communication technologies in the service sector, changed into a "female ghetto".<sup>26</sup> According to Kumar, "As far as Taylorism remains the master principle, information technology has a greater potential for proletarianization rather than professionalization".<sup>27</sup>

### Call Centres Profile and Employment in Turkey

It is estimated that the number of call centres in Turkey in 2011 increased at a rate of 4% approaching 1100 when compared to the previous year. 23% of this increase evolved from an increase in the number of outsourcing service providers. The most important factor affecting this increase apart from the company's merger in outsourcing call centres is the newly-established outsourcing call centres' growth rate (by increasing the number of seats and by making investments).<sup>28</sup> When the sectoral distribution is considered, it is seen that the biggest share belongs to the sector of wholesale and retail sales. Additionally, one of the fields with the most important increase is public services. The number of call centres in the public sector showed an increase at a rate of 31% when compared to the total number of call centres, and it is estimated that in 2012, it increased from 3.2% to 4.1%.<sup>29</sup>

When the gender distribution of call centres is considered, 70 % of its total employment is constituted by women. A decrease is seen regarding the age distribution when compared to the previous years. Accordingly, the number of employees aged between 25-29 and 30+ has decreased, whereas there has been a 77% increase between the ages 18-24. Especially the economic slowdown in the world caused a decrease in the age of young population to start working.<sup>30</sup>

### Research Methodology

The analyses are based on a field study of 38 call centre employees from various companies located in İstanbul, Kocaeli and Erzincan. This research included face-to-face interviews with call centre employees and one call centre manager in an insurance company. The interviews focused on work organisation, skills and involved call centres in a range of industry sectors, including financial services, banking, and telecommunications. Call centres in the public sector

24. Vicki Belt, *Op cit.*; Vicki Belt at al., *Op. cit.*; Susan Durbin, "Gender, Skills and Careers in UK Call Centres" pp.117-136 in Burgess, John and Connell, Julia (eds), *Developments in The Call Centre Industry: Analysis, Changes and Challenges*, London: Routledge, 2006; Kate Mulholland, "Gender, Emotional Labour and Teamworking in a Call Centre", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 31, No 3, 2002, p. 283-303.

25. S. Stanworth, "Women and Work in the Information Age", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 7, No 1, 2000, p. 29.

26. Vicki Belt, *Op. cit.*

27. Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 51.

28. NeT Research, *Turkey Call Centres Market 2012*, NeT Research Report, 2012.

29. IMI Conferences, *2012 Turkey Call Centres Research Report*, <http://www.callcentrelife.com.tr/?p=5285&lang=tr> (Accessed 5 January 2013)

30. VodaSoft, *Turkey Call Centres Summary Report*, 2008.

<http://www.vodasoft.com.tr/spage.php?prm1=151&prm2=152&prm3=275> (Accessed 15 December 2012)

have also been studied. The data reported were collected over a period of three months between October 2012 and December 2012. Each interview was scheduled for thirty-five minutes with the longest interview exceeding sixty minutes.

The paper also draws on the results of a detailed study of the nature of work and women employment in call centres. The collection of data was carried out by insourcing and outsourcing a heterogeneous plurality of instruments. The case study organizations were chosen to include examples of "good practice" in the employment of women (in terms of training, working conditions and career opportunities), and were selected after a thorough research of documentary evidence and interviews with industry agents. The case studies involved a survey application and face-to-face interviews with call centre employees. Extensive documentary evidence has also been collected, including literatures and publications by industry specialists. Sample size is relatively low (38) because it is very difficult to come in contact with call centre workers due to the working conditions in their workplace. For this reason, this study was examined using known friends as a means of getting across to other call centre workers.

### The General Profile of Call Centres as Part of the Research

When we investigate the sectoral distribution of the people working in call centres, we see that 47.4 % work in finance, communication, banking and insurance companies; 28% in public institutions, 7.9 % in communications, and 15.8 % in other sectors such as food, white goods, etc. The demographic information of 38 participants is presented in Table 1. The average age of the participant is 26.

**Table 1:** The demographic information of participants

		N	%
<b>Sex</b>	Female	25	65.8
	Male	13	34.2
<b>Education</b>	Elementary	4	10.5
	High School	8	21.1
	Graduate	18	47.4
	Graduate Student	7	18.4
	Post Graduate	1	2.6
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	19	50.0
	Married	18	47.4
	Divorced	1	2.6
<b>Work Experience</b>	None	8	21.1
	1 year<	8	21.1
	1-3 year<	16	42.1
	3-5 year<	4	10.5
	5 year >	2	5.3
<b>Working Time in Call Centres</b>	1 year<	9	23.7
	1-3 year<	16	42.1
	3-5 year<	4	10.5
	5-7 year<	4	10.5
	7 year >	5	13.2
<b>Occupation</b>	Inbound	22	57.9
	Outbound	8	21.1
	Other	8	21.1



65.8 % of participants in this study were female. This rate is consistent with the fact that 70 % of call centre workers in Turkey are female and 47 % are university graduates. Also, that 18.4% of university students work in the call centre sector shows that there exists an increase in the sector's need for highly qualified staff. The boom in the call centre sector in recent years also makes the sector highly competitive so it is understood that women and men having a university degree are preferred. 50 % of the workers are single and 47.4 are married. 63 % have a work experience of less than three years. It is also seen that most of them have some work experience and this makes them preferred by the call centre managers.

It is a known fact that there is a really high amount of labour turnover in call centres. Our survey results confirm this fact. 23.7 % of these call centre workers have worked or been working in the sector for less than a year and 42.1 % between one or three years. The percentage of people working for the sector for more than five years is 23.7 %. This rate results from the public sector's call centre workers included in our study. Almost all of the people in this rate work for the public sector. In Turkey, people have more chance of security in the public sector than in private ones. About 60% of call centre workers included in this study handle inbound calls. The inbound customer service is a kind of support service where the calls are handled, the scripts are followed and the length of speech is controlled strictly. 21 % of the participants chose the outbound customer service option and 21 % chose the other option (post-sales services etc.) in the survey. Outbound customer service is a kind of service making outbound calls where you don't have to follow the script strictly, and there are more flexible talking times.

When we look at the daily working hours, we see that 52% of the workers work for 6-8 hours a day, 34 % work for 9 hours or more, 13% of them, especially the part-time workers, work for 4-5 hours a day. It is understood that the wages of call centre employees, whose working conditions are quite difficult, are not satisfying. Only 44.7% of the employees get \$800 and over, 47.7% of them get a salary varying between \$400 - \$800, 7.9% get less than \$400. When we look at the sector in general, more than half of them pay a salary of less than \$800. The wage system is usually based on performance. While she was evaluating the performance system, a manager of a call centre in the insurance sector said these:

Telephone calls made by operators during the control period are evaluated as part of the accepted call centre criteria. After these evaluations, they have the right to get extra monthly or annual wages. The criteria such as the quality of the call, the number of incoming/outgoing calls, the period of the calls, the period of answering a call, the rate of missing calls are the basis of the salary (A female call centre manager).

Another finding is that 68.4% of call centre employees find their social rights adequate. 31.6% of the employees think that their social rights are not adequate and their main reasons are getting low salaries or wages and the limited coverage of their private health insurance. That most of the participants find their social rights adequate results from the fact that most of them work full time and at insourcing call centres. Especially the part-time employees of the outsourcing call centre firms express that their rights are violated mostly because they do not have social security. 92.1% of the participants work full time. It is a new phenomenon for call centres to have full-time employees instead of part-time ones. Mital Research puts forward few reasons for the change in the nature of part-time labour.<sup>31</sup> First of all, the labour market

---

31. Mital, *European Location Study: Call Centres in the UK, Republic of Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands*, Mital Research: London, 1998.

boom after 1990 meant that less number of people are ready for part-time jobs. Secondly, due to the high rate of labour turnover in call centre industry, the employers have to pay more wages per hour in order to keep their staff. Thirdly, education costs and other human capital investments can become more effective with full time employment. It is also possible to add a fourth reason. In an interview we had with a call centre manager, we realized that they think "full time employees have a higher performance in terms of efficiency". The outsourcing service providers in Turkey are really new (23%), and especially when it is taken into consideration that the employees in this sector work part-time, it seems quite reasonable that this rate turns out to be low (7.9%).

Work environment in call centres can cause work-related stress. Possible risk factors for stress can arise from either work content or work context. When we investigated the physical and psychosocial risk factors in call centres, we couldn't categorize them as most of them chose more than one option. It is seen that they mostly complain of depression, gastritis, straightening of cervical spine, and herniated discs. Physical problems such hearing loss, vocal cords, dizziness, musculoskeletal disorders, obesity were also present. Psychological problems included disruption in social life, sleep disturbances, mental stress and anxiety.

As a result, when we look at the general profile of the employees working in the sector with respect to the survey and face-to-face interviews, we see that they are mostly women, educated and they usually work for 8 hours or more. Except the ones in the public sector they also have less than three years of work experience; they find their social rights adequate, but generally have stress and physical illnesses and ask for better working conditions.

### ***The Organization of Call Centre Work and Women Labour***

In this study we have conducted about call centres, we have determined the fact that all the organizational structure of business is based on increasing automation and monitoring. Surveillance systems and technologies are the central parts of 'late capitalism' or information age capitalism. ACDS (automated call distribution system), which is used in call centres, is applied to all business processes. "At the heart of every call centre is the (ACDS). The ACDS receives customer calls and automatically routes them to the appropriate agent, in line with a set of programmed instructions. The ACDS is connected to a range of databases, in what is known as Computer Telephony Integration (CTI). With CTI, not only is the call automatically transmitted to the agent, but so too are the records of the customer, often along with a flashing message instructing the agent to try and sell a particular product during the call, based on a computer generated individual customer profile".<sup>32</sup>

During our study, we realized that in general they are uncomfortable with this system. For example, in the inbound service study done in a call centre in the white goods sector, the computer gives just a five seconds break between two calls. A master's degree student working in this sector says that:

98 talks out of 100 should be positive. When you fall below this limit, they give you a written warning. If this happens a second time, they make you redundant/lay you off. The quality control specialists constantly record and then listen to your calls. There is a very tight control. I have no career expectations in this sector (A male call centre agent).

32. R. Richardson at al., "Taking Calls to Newcastle: The Regional Implication of the Growth in Call Centres", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 34, No 4, 2000, p. 363.



One of the issues they are most uncomfortable with is that the breaks are too short to even meet their personal needs (10 minutes in every two hours or in some places only 20 minutes a day). There are no breaks in between two calls and the job becomes a routine so the staffs have the opinion that after some time they feel terribly fed up. On the other hand, it is in our findings that the record of talks in call centres does not bother 94 % of the employees. We think this situation shows that the employees are non-resistant to power without a request from it. It is understood that the managers try hard to convince the employees that they have control and monitoring not because they want to give harm to the employees but because they use it for benefit, profits and efficiency. The employees see this situation as the necessity of the job itself, but prefer more flexible working conditions where they can be more creative about the frequency, time and content of the telephone calls and where there are breaks between two calls. A university student carrying out a telephone survey on the control of talk times says these:

One of the issues that really drove me crazy was our supervisor standing beside us and constantly showing the time and putting pressure on us in order to make us complete the survey while we were having extremely high-level conversations with the finance managers of several companies. We were getting warnings from them, but they also immediately came close to us when we exceeded the time limit of thirty minutes, and this was a factor that really stressed me out. Throughout the day, we had to fill in at least 20 questionnaires and the maximum time limit was 30 minutes. ...Once I encountered my ex-boyfriend, I had just started work and I had to do that survey. Of course he realized that it was me from the tone of my voice and I felt terrible. But still I think that this is a good job for students. Instead of doing surveys in the street, despite all its negativities I prefer sitting in a warm office (A female call centre agent).

As it is seen, both in inbound and outbound calls, besides recording calls in terms of security or reliance of the customers, the application of a strict system such as dependence on the full text and control of talk time puts pressure on the employees. According to a master's degree student who worked in a call centre for a very short time and quitted afterwards as she couldn't stand this stressful pace:

Knowing that you're constantly being listened to causes so much stress as you try hard not to make sentences other than the ones the management wants you to say. Also, I haven't encountered even one woman customer so far. Male employees had women customers and women employees had male customers and although the management tried hard to convince us that this was definitely coincidental, none of the employees believed it. Some of us even got unprincipled offers. In such situations, we had to say "If you continue to speak like this, I will have to end the call" three times and we couldn't do anything else. This situation was really not bearable (A female call centre agent).

When it is evaluated from the point of the call centre management, according to the woman manager we interviewed:

By means of this software used, both the performance of the call centre is measured and these data are used while planning for the future. Also, through the reports taken from this software, the defective parts are determined and some precautions can be taken to improve them (A female call centre manager).



In conclusion, by means of ACD system, call centre employees, in the changing nature of call centre work organization, do not have, in this new system, the "relative initiative" said to have been given to the workers before. The main points such as the frequency, time and content of the telephone calls, and when the breaks will be taken have been made automatic.

### ***The Nature of Call Centre Work and Women***

When the nature of call centre work is taken into consideration, it is seen that the main problem of the working women is the workload and its being limited and repetitive. The repetition of standard sentences is one of the internal control methods as it makes the internalization of company values and creating a customer-oriented work environment easy.<sup>33</sup> Even though the education (based on repetition) they get sometimes provokes resistance, generally it is not individual. Individual resistance was most commonly seen among the workers in outsourcing companies. Some examples of this kind of resistance are "speaking reluctantly" or "extending the break". Also, the tension they feel during their talks with the customers has an important role in increasing their stress at work. As one of the agents expresses:

We are expected to be cheerful at all times; however, after a tense talk with a customer, we have so much difficulty in continuing this way. We have to continue working this way because the recordings are being listened to at the end of the day and the number of calls we get an hour is calculated. This becomes a criterion in the assessment of performance. ...They even interfere with our personal lives just to make sure our performance is not affected negatively. They contact the families of the employees. It seems that the belief that the problems in our personal lives might in the end affect both our patience and dialogue with the customers makes these interventions necessary. However, this situation puts us under more pressure (A female call centre agent).

As it is all around the world, the most common feature of employees working in call centres in Turkey is that most of them are women. In the interviews we have had, it seemed that the most important factor for this situation is women having a non-threatening tone of voice and behaviour in customer services. The answer we got from a manager to the questions "Why are there lots of women employees in this sector? Are you planning a career for them?" was as follows:

The main reason why there are so many women employees in this sector is that they express themselves more comfortably. Due to their gender, women customer agents are more advantageous in complaint management issues than men. In career planning, gender discrimination is out of the question. All our employees can equally benefit from the career opportunities given to them (A female manager in the insurance sector).

Nearly all of the participants have the opinion that women are preferred due to some reasons such as their tone of voice, being patient, ability of persuasion and diction. Besides all of these reasons, one participant voiced his criticism about the tone of voice by emphasizing that it is a stereotyped idea. Another agent mentioned the fact that women are "more manageable". In a

---

33. Raffaella Valsecchi, "Visible Moves and Invisible Bodies: The Case of Teleworking in an Italian Call Centre", *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2006, p. 123-138.



brief note, women are preferred because of their inborn characteristics. To Holman et al., women are more trustworthy and better at using the keyboard.<sup>34</sup> According to a call centre employee:

Most of the employees at our workplace are women. It is believed that women have a more effective tone of voice. Even if it is not clearly expressed, there is also the opinion and presupposition that 'men would rather talk to women agents' (Male call centre agent).

This situation shows that the women labourers in call centres are always subject to "control devices based on gender". In other words, with a gender mainstreaming approach, it comes into question that some traits of women such as sentimentalism, passiveness, philanthropy, servility and naivety can be used as a control device. Thus, it is quite obvious why women agents are generally preferred mostly by the employers. Today the nature of call centre work involves traits such as 'knowledge and skills', 'not worrying about customer requests', 'service friendliness', 'being hard-working' and 'embracing the job'. The personal feelings of the employees have now become a part of the service they provide.<sup>35</sup> "Affective labour is labour that produces or processes feelings such as well-being, sensation, excitement or passion, etc. .... different from the traditional mental labour, this labour category is seen as a component of capital".<sup>36</sup>

### *Skill and Career Progression for Women*

One of the issues we have dealt with in our research is whether women can progress in their careers in call centres. Although call centres are technology intensive places, most call centre employers have the opinion that their staffs don't need to have detailed technological knowledge or ability.<sup>37</sup> There is only a need for agents specialized in after sales technical support. What the others need to have is the 'soft skills' such as communication, customer relations and teamwork.

In this regard, 55.3% of the participants said 'No', whereas 44.7% said 'Yes' when they were asked if there had been any job, authority or level changes in their positions/duties. This situation shows that there are limited opportunities for the employees who want to build a career in the call centre sector. The call centre hierarchy has four levels: agents, team leaders, supervisors and managers. According to the study we conducted, the vacant positions are usually for the call centre agents. As a call centre employee says, for instance:

I have a good command of English. However, I cannot use it in any way. I am at the complaint management department now. The only thing I want is to work in the sales department. For now, it seems impossible. I already encountered much difficulty in finding this job. I neither have time nor energy searching for another job (Female call centre agent).

The few people who have career chances can become a team leader or a supervisor. And in their career plan, they usually want to become a 'manager' or a 'call centre instructor'. They

34. David Holman et al., *The Global Call Centre Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*, Report of the Global Centre Network, 2007. [www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcentre/.../GC](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcentre/.../GC) (Accessed 22 December 2012)

35. Ayşe Akalın, "Duygulanım ve Duygulanımsal Emek Üzerine Notlar", *Birikim*, No.217, 2007, p. 119.

36. Haluk Yurtsever, *Kapitalizmin Sınırları ve Toplumsal Proleterya*, İstanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2011, p.267.

37. Randal Richardson et al., "Taking Calls to Newcastle: The Regional Implication of the Growth in Call Centres", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 34, No 4, 2000, p. 364.

also emphasized that the company itself needs to build a career plan for them. This situation leads to a polarization between the ones working at the lowest level of the hierarchy and the ones who are on a higher level with their status and income.

## Conclusion

The call centres provide a lot of job opportunities for women. But the findings of this study give support to studies indicating that call centres are the contemporary incarnation of the principles of scientific management developed by Taylor. The study we have documented here has several important implications on our understanding of women labour in call centres. Consequently, women labour has become the predominant factor of call centres both in public and private sectors. In other words, the call centres work has gained a sector character where labour is popularised, has become unqualified and where women labour is predominant. Especially, we realised that in lower-skilled call centres, part-time work plays a crucial part in the gendering of flexibility. That is to say, women labour in the call centre industry are working longer hours, earning lower wages and are employed in a disorganized sector.

Our finding gives the idea that the criticism of Bain and Taylor needs to be evaluated in two contexts. Our first finding is about the full time insourcing labour. In sectors such as insurance, finance and banking, the institutionalized company employees do not have any idea or efforts towards individual or mass resistance at all. The biggest factor for this can be that, on one hand, they have social security and on the other hand, they work full time and their relative income is high. In outsourcing labour, however, we have observed that there are individual and mass strike actions. Working relatively part time, insecurely, under too much supervision and monitoring, and having a low relative income are the most important reasons for this resistance. It is also remarkable that this resistance does not have the characteristics of the ones claiming union rights. It is possible to say that the existing control and supervision mechanisms in call centres obviously show the characteristics of the 'panopticon' approach that Foucault expressed. However, the problem here is the assumption that the resistance is impossible. As Callaghan and Thompson mentioned, despite the strict monitoring and supervision mechanism coupled with the bureaucratic control style in call centres, it is possible to have a resistance.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, the 'technological panoptican' approach can be used as an assisting metaphor in explaining the existing monitoring and control style in call centres. This point of view seems important in appreciating the reality experienced.

In our study, monitoring, having face-to-face and thorough interviews instead of having a survey greatly assisted in understanding the nature of women labour in call centres. It is understood that 'Taylorism' is an important approach in explaining the nature of women labour in call centres. It is seen that Taylorism is a dominant approach in the tendencies to simplify, standardize the job and make it unqualified. Call centres, in this respect, are a modern symbol of scientific management. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel expresses "Labour in Taylorism is the human labour that has turned into a technological mass; it is homogeneous with machines, can directly be applied to machines, a part of it can easily be or completely turned into a machine."<sup>39</sup> Here, labour doesn't only go under the dominance of capital in terms of the

38. G. Callaghan and P. Thompson, "Edwards Revisited: Technical and Call Centres", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol.22, No 1, 2001, p. 34.

39. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Zihin Emeği Kol Emeği, Epistemoloji Eleştirisi (Intellectual and Manual Labour A Critique of Epistemology)*, İstanbul: Metis Yay., 2011 [1978], p.166-167.



economy but it also becomes dependent on capital that is, physically and technologically. According to Kumar, "as long as Taylorism remains the master principle, information technology has a greater potential for proletarianization rather than professionalization."<sup>40</sup> Within this period, preferring a better educated woman labour in call centres is really only consistent with their getting a limited career opportunity. Finally, in understanding the nature of labour, especially women labour in call centres, the 'electronic panopticon' and 'Taylorism' approaches should be addressed together. It is hoped that this study can also enhance a proper understanding of the work processes that produce patterns of stress.

Our results suggest that in order to improve working conditions, job demands should be reduced and break at work lengthened. The responsibility of the call centres is to provide a career opportunity, job security and job satisfaction in the workplace. Stress management programmes can help to sustain a stress free workplace environment in call centres. Above all we should recognize the fact that call centre workers are also a part of the working class.

---

40. Krishan Kumar, Op. cit., p. 39.

## Bibliography

- Afrouz Yari and Shahram Afrougheh, "Franz Kafka's The Castle: A Foucaultian Reading", *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, Vol. 1, No 3, 2013, p. 63-67.
- Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Zihin Emeği Kol Emeği, Epistemoloji Eleştirisi (Intellectual and Manual Labour A Critique of Epistemology)*, İstanbul: Metis Yay., 2011 [1978].
- Ayşe Akalın, "Duygulanım ve Duygulanımsal Emek Üzerine Notlar", *Birikim*, No 217, 2007, p. 114-121.
- Celia Stanworth, "Women and Work in the Information Age", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 7, No 1, 2000, p. 20-32.
- David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell Pub., 1989, p. 285.
- David Holman et al., *The Global Call Centre Report: International Perspectives on Management and Employment*, Report of the Global Centre Network, 2007. [www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcentre/.../GC](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/globalcallcentre/.../GC) (Accessed 22 December 2012)
- Frederick W. Taylor, *Shop Management*, New York and London, Harper & Brothers & Publishers, 1911.
- Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Five Edition, USA, Greenwood Press, 1977.
- George Callaghan and P. Thompson, "Edwards Revisited: Technical and Call Centres", *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2001, p. 13-37.
- Gloria Lankshear et al., "Call Centre Employees' Responses to Electronic Monitoring: Some Research Findings", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 15, No 3, 2001, p. 595-605.
- IMI Conferences, 2012 Turkey Call Centres Research Report. <http://www.callcentrelife.com.tr/?p=5285&lang=tr> (Accessed 5 January 2013)
- James Wickham and Gráinne Collins, "The Call Centre: A Nursery for New Forms of Work Organisation?" *The Services Industry Journal*, Vol 24, No 1, 2004, p. 1-18.
- Janet Semple, *Bentham's Prison: A Study of the Panopticon Penitentiary*, Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Kate Mulholland, "Gender, Emotional Labour and Teamworking in a Call Centre", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 31, No 3, 2002, p. 283-303.
- Krishan Kumar, *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society: New Theories of the Contemporary World*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995.
- Linda McDowell, *Capital Culture, Gender at Work in the City*, Blackwell Pub., 1997.
- Maeve Houlihan, "Tensions and Variations in Call Centre Management Strategies", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2002, p. 67-85.
- Marcela Miozzo and Luc Soete, "Internationalization of Services: A Technological Perspective", *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 67, No 2-3, 2001, p. 159-185.
- Michael Fisher, "The Crisis of Civil Service Trade Unionism: A Case Study of Call Centre Development", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol. 18, No 1, 2004, p. 157-177.
- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977.



- Mital, *European Location Study: Call Centres in the UK, Republic of Ireland, Belgium and the Netherlands*, Mital Research: London, 1998.
- NeT Research, *Turkey Call Centres Market 2012*, NeT Research Report, 2012.
- Peter Bain and Phil Taylor, "Entrapped by the 'Electronic Panopticon' Worker Resistance in the Call Centre", *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 15, No 1, 2000, p. 1-17.
- Peter Bain et al., "Taylorism, Targets and the Pursuit of Quantity and Quality by Call Centre Management", *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 17, No 3, 2002, p.170-85.
- Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, "An Assembly Line in the Head': Work and Employee Relations in the Call Centre", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 30, No 2, 1999, p. 101-117.
- Raffaella Valsecchi, "Visible Moves and Invisible Bodies: The Case of Teleworking in an Italian Call Centre", *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2006, p. 123-138.
- Ranald Richardson and J. Neill Marshall, "The Growth of Telephone Call Centres in Peripheral Areas of Britain: Evidence from Tyne and Wear", *Area*, Vol. 28, No 3, 1996, p. 308-317.
- Ranald Richardson et al., "Taking Calls to Newcastle: The Regional Implication of the Growth in Call Centres", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 34, No 4, 2000, p. 357-370.
- Ronaldo Munck, *Globalization and Labour: The New 'Great Transformation'*, Zed Books, 2002.
- Rosemary Batt, "Work Organization, Technology, and Performance in Customer Service and Sales", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 52, No 4, 1999, p. 539-564.
- Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, "(Not) Hanging on the Telephone: Payment Systems in the New Sweatshops", *Centre for Economic Performance London School of Economics and Political Science WP*, No 390, 1998, p. 1-41.
- Sue Fernie and David Metcalf, "Ricky Don't Lose That Number... Payment Systems, Monitoring Systems, Monitoring and Performance in Call Centres", *Centre for Economic Performance London School of Economics and Political Science WP*, No 1047, 1999, p. 1-15.
- Susan Durbin, "Gender, Skills and Careers in UK Call Centres" John Burgess and Julia Connell (eds.), *Developments in the Call Centre Industry: Analysis, Changes and Challenges*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 117-136.
- Vicki Belt et al., "Women's Work in the Information Economy: The Case of Telephone Call Centres", *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol 3, No 3, 2000, p. 366-385.
- Vicki Belt, "A Female Ghetto? Women's Careers in Call Centres", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol 12, No 4, 2002, p. 51-66.
- Vicki Belt et al., "Women, Social Skill and Interactive Service Work in Telephone Call Centres", *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol 17, No 1, 2002, p. 20-34.
- Vodasoft, Turkey Call Centres Summary Report, 2008. <http://www.vodasoft.com.tr/spage.php?prm1=151&prm2=152&prm3=275> (Accessed 15 December 2012).

# JOURNAL of CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION and SECURITY



ISSN: 2045-1903

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) is for academics, policy makers and practitioners to engage in discussions on a wide range of peace, conflict and human security related issues in a multidisciplinary forum with contributions from political science, security studies, international relations, development studies, post-conflict reconstruction studies, economics, sociology, international law, political history, and human geography.

As an international refereed e-journal, edited by a group of acclaimed scholars indicated in the Editorial Board, the Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security is published at its own website <http://www.cesran.org/jcts>. It welcomes submissions of **articles** from related persons involved in the scope of the journal as well as **summary reports of conferences and lecture series** held in the social sciences. Submissions in comparative analysis, with case studies and empirical research are particularly encouraged.

Prospective authors should submit 5.000 - 10.000 word articles for consideration in Microsoft Word-compatible format. For more complete descriptions and submission instructions, please access the Editorial Guidelines and Style Guidelines pages at the CESRAN website: <http://www.cesran.org/jcts>. Contributors are urged to read CESRAN's author guidelines and style guidelines carefully before submitting articles. Articles submissions should be sent in electronic format to:

**Prof. Alpaslan ÖZERDEM** - *Editor-in-Chief* - [alpozerdem@cesran.org](mailto:alpozerdem@cesran.org)

**Publication date:** Spring issue — April  
Autumn issue — October

# JOURNAL of CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION and SECURITY



ISSN: 2045-1903

[www.cesran.org/jcts](http://www.cesran.org/jcts)

The Journal of Conflict Transformation and Security (JCTS) provides a platform to analyse conflict transformation as the processes for managing change in a non-violent way to produce equitable outcomes for all parties that are sustainable. Security is understood as encapsulating a wide range of human security concerns that can be tackled by both 'hard' and 'soft' measures. Therefore, the Journal's scope not only covers such security sector reform issues as restructuring security apparatus, reintegration of ex-combatants, clearance of explosive remnants of war and cross-border management, but also the protection of human rights, justice, rule of law and governance.

Peer-reviewed | Academic journal | By **CESRAN** (Centre for Strategic Research and Analysis)

**Editor-in-Chief:** Prof. Alpaslan Özerdem - [alpozerdem\[@\]cesran.org](mailto:alpozerdem[@]cesran.org)

**Managing Editor:** Laura Payne - [laura.payne\[@\]coventry.ac.uk](mailto:laura.payne[@]coventry.ac.uk)

**Co-Managing Editor:** Dr SungYong Lee - [sungyong.lee\[@\]otago.ac.nz](mailto:sungyong.lee[@]otago.ac.nz)

**Assistant Editors:** Richard Slade - [slader\[@\]coventry.ac.uk](mailto:slader[@]coventry.ac.uk) | Husrev Tabak - [husrevtabak\[@\]cesran.org](mailto:husrevtabak[@]cesran.org)

## Editorial Board

**Prof. the Baroness Haleh Afshar**, University of York, UK | **Prof. Bruce Baker**, Coventry University, UK | **Dr Richard Bowd**, UNDP, Nepal | **Prof. Ntuda Ebode**, University of Yaounde II, Cameroon | **Prof. Scott Gates**, PRIO, Norway | **Dr Antonio Giustozzi**, London School of Economics, UK | **Dr Cathy Gormley-Heenan**, University of Ulster, UK | **Prof. Paul Gready**, University of York, UK | **Prof. Fen Hampson**, Carleton University, Canada | **Prof. Mohammed Hamza**, Lund University, Sweden | **Prof. Alice Hills**, University of Leeds | **Dr Maria Holt**, University of Westminster, UK | **Prof. Alan Hunter**, Coventry University, UK | **Dr Tim Jacoby**, University of Manchester, UK | **Dr Khalid Khoser**, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Switzerland | **Dr William Lume**, South Bank University, UK | **Dr Roger Mac Ginty**, St Andrews' University, UK | **Mr Rae Mac Grath**, Save the Children UK Somalia | **Prof. Mansoob Murshed**, ISS, The Netherlands | **Dr Wale Osofisan**, Help Age International, UK | **Dr Mark Pelling**, King's College, UK | **Prof. Mike Pugh**, University of Bradford, UK | **Mr Gianni Rufini**, Freelance Consultant, Italy | **Dr Mark Sedra**, Centre for Int. Governance Innovation, Canada | **Dr Emanuele Sommario**, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna, Italy | **Dr Hans Skotte**, Trondheim University, Norway | **Dr Arne Strand**, CMI, Norway | **Dr Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh**, University of Po, France | **Dr. Mandy Turner**, University of Bradford, UK | **Prof. Roger Zetter**, University of Oxford, UK

# CESRAN Papers

**CESRAN Papers | No: 6 | November 2011**

**FREE CORSICA! A Study of Contemporary Chinese Nationalism**  
By James Pearson

**CESRAN Papers | No: 5 | July 2011**

**COMPETITIVE REGULATION: Stepping Outside the Public /Private Policy Debate**  
By Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon

**CESRAN Papers | No: 4 | May 2011**

**Turkey: The Elephant in the Room of Europe**  
By Hüseyin Selçuk Dönmez

**CESRAN Papers | No: 3 | April 2011**

**"Whither Neoliberalism? Latin American Politics in the Twenty-first Century"**  
By Jewellord (Jojo) Nem Singh

**CESRAN Papers | No: 2 | March 2011**

**"Civil-Military Relations in Marcos' Philippines"**  
By Richard Lim

**CESRAN Papers | No: 1 | March 2011**

**"The Paradox of Turkish Civil Military Relations"**  
By Richard Lim



**CESRAN** |

Centre for  
Strategic Research & Analysis