

REPORT
Interaction and consultation on the issue of protection to
the women employees of the call centers. held on
17th January, 2006

The rape and murder of a Bangalore based call centre employee in December 2005 by the driver of the company commissioned taxi has brought into sharp focus transport arrangements made by such centres. The incident does not deserve to be dismissed as a "stray, one-off incident." Instead, it is a warning that they should make foolproof arrangements to ensure the safety of women. The heinous offence calls for a serious debate on transport arrangements given the fact that women account for about 40 per cent of the 3,50,000 call centre employees in India. The Amendment to the Factories Act which allows women to work between 10 pm and 6 am, in Information Technology among other sectors, clearly puts the onus of ensuring safety of women employees on the employer. It further states that these timings shall be allowed only if the employer ensures safety of women at the workplace and while commuting.

Most women employed by call centres work in eight hour shifts at odd hours at monthly salaries ranging from Rs 8000 to Rs 30,000. Most call centres handle business inquiries from English speaking countries. It is true that call centres have generated a good number of job opportunities but the fact remains that most employees accept whatever benefits come their way and don't question their work conditions. They are

happy with a pick and drop facility. In the case in Bangalore, the victim's house was 25 kilometer from her office.

The National Commission for Women (NCW) has taken up itself the task of holding a roundtable discussion on the issue by involving police, women activists and senior officers from the Ministry of Information Technology.

There are 200,000 persons working in call centres in the National Capital Region alone, according to the Call Centre Association of India (CCAI). The Association counts its existence as a year old from the time it entered into a strategic partnership with the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII). Fifty call centres, mostly from the NCR region and the North, are registered as members of the CCAI. Although the Association has evolved guidelines in the interest of safety of women working in call centres, it does not have the powers to ensure compliance. Sources in the Association say that they can only recommend action as they are not a regulatory authority. Non adherence to guidelines can at best attract cancellation from CCAI. With this limitation in view, the Association is trying to encourage best practices.

Objectives of the meeting

- A look at the action plan drawn by the CCAI after consultations with the police and security agencies to ensure safety of employees.

- The suggestion mooted last October by the CPI(M) backed Centre of Indian Trade Unions(CITU) for a workers union to protect the rights of BPO employees has received a lukewarm response from the \$5.8 billion outsourcing industry. According to news reports, the cry for ushering in trade unionism in the BPO sector has become more vehement after the rape and murder of a woman employee in Bangalore.
- A discussion to explore the idea to arm women employees with security gadgets with in-built features as hooter and delivery of Short Message to the BPO administrator.
- While some call centres have guidelines that specify that women should not be the first to be picked from home and the last to be dropped back, it is worth finding out whether these guidelines are being adhered to at all.

Observation :

The consultation evoked an overwhelming response. Apart from call centre representatives, women activists and policemen put forth their views and suggestions.

NCW Chairperson, Girija Vyas introduced the subject to the participants and raised crucial issues concerning the safety of women. Dr. Vyas said that the Bangalore incident has been an eye opener for the call centre industry. She said that women account for about 40 per cent of the 3,50,000 call centre employees in India. The NCW Chairperson drew the attention of the participants to the Amendment to the

Factories Act which clearly puts the onus of ensuring safety of women employees on the employer. The NCW Chairperson suggested that companies strengthen their internal codes and set up a complaints committee to deal with cases of sexual harassment at workplace as spelt out by the Supreme Court in its guidelines in the Vishakha case. She stressed the need for third party representation in such committees. She said that all participants are of the view that a new legislation is necessary to ensure safety of women employees as there are so many women in the BPO sector and the number is likely to increase. She said that the Commission or any State Commission for Women can make surprise visits to any company to see if they are complying with the directions.

Hanif Qureshi, Senior Superintendent of Police, Gurgaon

said that the amended labour policy of Haryana government clearly states that women can be permitted to work in night shifts provided the companies that employ them take responsibility of their security. Qureshi said that notwithstanding this fact, the police is certainly responsible for ensuring their safety. He said that the Gurgaon police has a night patrolling system between 6 pm and 11 pm and 11 pm and 5 am. The SSP said that the patrolling system has some deficiencies due to shortage of staff and vehicles. ``We have sent a proposal to the State government to give us more manpower and vehicles. They have assured us that they will

provide the requisite staff and vehicles. So, we hope that we will be able to improve patrolling in the near future. " Shri Qureshi said that the call centre owners can do their bit by providing the police a complete record of the antecedents of their drivers. He said that copies of such records should be available with the police and the concerned BPO. The police on its part will try to verify antecedents of drivers within four to five weeks. He said that Gurgaon has about 150 call centres including 50 big call centres. He acknowledged that some BPOs are following good practices and it would be worthwhile if the Call Centre Association of India consolidates and circulates guidelines on good practices. The SSP further suggested that the BPO sector install Global Positioning System (GPS) for tracking the position of the vehicles through satellite. He explained that a hardware is installed in the vehicle and this helps a person sitting in the control room in locating the vehicle.

Piyush Mordia, Senior Superintendent of Police, Noida

suggested creation of a pool of drivers as a stand by in case the need arises to substitute regular taxi drivers. He said that each driver employed or working on a part-time basis with a call centre must wear a uniform and carry an identity card. Mordia said that his force is already overburdened and short-staffed. As such, it is not possible for the Police to spare its men only for verifying the antecedents of drivers. Elaborating

upon the constraints of the police, Mordia said that they have to ensure law and order in the rest of the district as well. "It is physically not feasible for us to cross-check details of each driver within a fortnight especially when the driver is living in a remote village." Mordia said that it is however possible for the Noida police to tell BPOs within 2-3 days if any case is pending against a driver in the local police station. He said that they are trying to ensure that each driver reports to the police station from time to time. The SSP said that BPOs should set aside a separate fund for verifying the antecedents of the drivers. He said That the police is trying its best to strengthen patrolling. At the same time, Mordia suggested a regulation that would necessitate police permission for identifying location for a call centre. He said that if call centres were to be concentrated in one area, it would strengthen police patrolling efforts.

Keshav Dwivedi, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Crime Against Women Cell, Delhi Police drew attention to the dormitory arrangements made by Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Limited for women working in night shifts. He said that these dormitories had an excellent track record and no complaints were received from women employees.

Deepak Kapoor, Chairman, Public Relations Committee of the Call Centre Association of India suggested police verification of all third party vendors in the Business Process Outsourcing Sector. These include drivers, caterers and security agencies. Kapoor said that this verification should be done on the lines of police verification for tenants and domestic servants. "We appreciate that it is a tedious process in cases where the person is from Assam, Sikkim or Orissa. In such cases, the police can verify the local address for immediate use." He said that police should also take fingerprint samples of third party vendors. The CCAI representative said that although all big BPOs have held discussions with the Gurgaon and Noida police respectively, the initiative taken by NCW is welcome as its intervention would give the CCAI more teeth. "The Commission has an independent voice and has the ears of policy makers." Kapoor suggested installation of a black box in vehicles used to pick up and drop call centre employees.

Bhupinder Singh, Administration Director, IBM Daksh, Gurgaon said that police should keep a track on the most used routes. He said that the government should make it mandatory for all light weight commercial vehicles to install speed governors. Singh said that their company does checks to verify antecedents of drivers. He sought the support of the

NCW in helping them organise self-defence training camps for women employees.

Dipak Datta, a management consultant and a member of the Executive Committee of CCAI said that no amount of security measures can guarantee total safety of women. He said that it is not possible to achieve cent per cent level of security to prevent recurrence of such incidents. AT the same time, sincere efforts should be made to minimize risk. He said that he is in favour of a legislation based on NCW guidelines for safety of women working in the BPO sector.

Shakti Singh Chauhan , Assistant Vice President, Facilities and Administration, WNS Global Services (P) Ltd. recommended a recognition programme to give monetary incentives to third party vendors as drivers. Chauhan's company in Gurgaon encourages the samiratan among drivers every month by giving them a cash reward. He says that such incentives encourage noble deeds. While outsourcing taxis, WNS ensures that they are fitted with a radio talkie. "This is a pre condition. The radio talkie is on the scanning mode. We have a base control in our premises in Gurgaon." Chauhan also mentioned that WNS gives each employee an ID card alongwith a laminated card. He explained that this laminated card is an escalation chart that enumerates numbers of the office telephone, the President,

Vice President and Transport help desk. The card is designed in a manner that ensures help at every level of hierarchy.

Krishna Lahiri Majumdar, Secretary, National Federation of Indian Women, an organisation working for the rights of women since 1954, expressed satisfaction over the efforts being made by the call centre representatives to ensure safety of women. After hearing the call centre representatives, Lahiri observed that they seemed to be doing more than she had thought. She said that providing a security guard is not the best option as it can further endanger the security of the woman occupant. Instead, she proposed installation of a security alarm in the rear seat that can be activated by the occupants and cannot be disabled by the driver. She further suggested conspicuous flash lights that can in no way go unnoticed in the event of a crisis.

Anju Pandey, Head, Gender Training Institute, Centre for Social Research voiced concern over the safety of women working in call centres. She said that it is very important to hold sensitisation programmes at call centres in order to create a gender friendly work environment. Pandey stressed the need for apprising recruits about the existence of an in house committee to deal with cases of sexual harassment.

Afreen, an advocate who provides legal services for The Rape Crisis cell of the Delhi Commission for Women

informed the participants that the 24 hour helpline run by the DCW assists Public Prosecutors. It helps rape victims as their private lawyers in Court. She said that as soon as the a police station registers a complaint of rape, it informs the Rape Crisis Cell who in turn get in touch with the Crisis Intervention Centre in the concerned locality. Persons working in the CIC give trauma counselling to the rape victim and ensure that police cooperates with the victim. In case a bail is granted to the accused, they file for cancellation of bail.

Aabha Nanda, Assistant Vice President, Human Resources, EXL Service informed the Commission that antecedents of all their taxi drivers are verified by the police. She said that EXL Service has recently upgraded the number of security guards. Besides, they have shuttle taxis to take employees from one call centre to another.

Ms. Nanda said that safety of women is not compromised at any stage and the company has two dedicated emergency call vans throughout the year. The logistics team conducts surprise checks along various routes. Two emergency helpline numbers are displayed in the taxis. While one number can be dialed in case the employee thinks that the drivers is driving rashly or over speeding, the other can be dialed in case the occupants of the car anticipate occurrence of an untoward incident. She said that the first person who boards a vehicle has to ascertain that the taxi driver is carrying an identity

card. She said that after the December incident, the CEO sent a mail to all employees reiterating safety precautions that are already in place and additional measures that had been adopted. The Assistant Vice President said that Exl Service has an Equal Opportunities Redressal Committee to deal with discrimination based on gender, race or community.

Manish Bahuguna, Assistant Manager, Human Resources, Abstract e services introduced his Ghazaibad based call centre as a 150 seater centre having 150 calling seats. He said that while he is in favour of taking full precautions for ensuring safety of women employees, our call centre is not in a position at the moment to provide a Global Positioning System. He said that they are trying to ensure that all their employees carry a cell phone by negotiating with HCL, the biggest distributor for NOKIA cell phones for getting corporate discount for purchasing cell phones for all employees to ensure cent per cent connectivity. He said that they have been trying to ensure that a woman is not the first to be picked up and the last to be dropped. Our Administrative staff also cross-checks with the women employees if they have reached safe.

P.K. Ghosh, General Manager (Operations) of North Star Contact Centre based in Noida said that his 100 seater call centre pursues a policy that stipulates that women are not the first to be dropped and the last to be picked up. They also ensure that a male employee besides the taxi driver is always

on board with a woman employee. In case a male employee is not on board on that route, they ensure that a security guard escort the woman employee. Ghosh said that their induction process lasts half a day and they brief the recruits about the security measures and work hours.

Pravin Singh, Regional Head, Sales, Swift Securities said that security should be provided in all call centre vehicles. He said that all security personnel should be verified by the police.

The Commission evolved a set of guidelines and sent them to the Call Centre Association of India and BPOs for adherence. These include measures to ensure safety of women employees while commuting, additional checks, good in-house practices and other gender friendly measures.

The guidelines are as follows:

MEASURES TO ENSURE SAFETY IN TRANSPORT

- Call centres should ensure that a security guard escort a woman in the office transport.
- Call Centre management should ensure that women employees are not the first to be picked up from their homes and the last to be dropped back home by the drivers.
- All call centre owners must provide the police a complete record of the antecedents of drivers as most of them depend on taxi operators for day-to-day transport arrangements.
- Police verification of drivers should be done on the lines of verification for domestic servants.

- Provision of radio talkie should be a pre condition while outsourcing taxis.
- A black box should be installed in vehicles hired for call centre employees.
- The BPO(Business Promotion Outsourcing) sector ought to install a Global Positioning System for tracking the position of its vehicles.
- A breath analyser test for taxi drivers is imperative.
- It should be compulsory for all taxi drivers to carry identity cards issued by the company and wear a uniform.
- Drivers of call centres should show up at the area police station from time to time for verification.

ADDITIONAL CHECKS

- The logistics team should conduct surprise checks of the taxis at random locations on the route of the office transport to monitor if the taxi drivers are adhering to their brief.
- A pool of drivers having established credentials should be created to provide reliable substitutes in case the need arises.
- Installation of speed governors in office cars and taxis is essential to check rash and negligent driving.
- Call centre owners should check permission of the police before deciding upon a location for setting up a call centre.

If all call centres are concentrated in one area, police patrolling and vigilance can be strengthened.

GOOD PRACTICES TO BE FOLLOWED IN-HOUSE

- A thorough induction process that spells out to the employees the work hours, transport arrangements and familiarity with organisation rules.
- It would be worthwhile if the employees are given a laminated card that lists numbers of the transport help desk alongwith those of senior persons who can be approached in case of an emergency. Some call centres have claimed that they provide such a laminated card alongwith the identity to each employee.
- Self defense training programmes for women employees should be organised by the call centres from time to time.
- Monetary incentives should be given every month to drivers who have done a good job.

GENDER FRIENDLY MEASURES

- Call centres need to ensure third party representation in committees set up to deal with cases of sexual harassment in compliance with the Supreme Court guidelines in the Vishakha case. As per the Supreme Court order, it is necessary and expedient for employers as well as other responsible persons and institutions to observe certain

guidelines to ensure prevention of sexual harassment of women. The guidelines suggest creation of a complaint mechanism for redressing complaints of sexual harassment. According to the guidelines, the complaints committee should be headed by a woman and half of its members should be women. To prevent the possibility of any undue pressure or influence from senior levels, such a Complaints Committee should involve a third party, either an NGO or anybody who is familiar with the issue of sexual harassment.

- Call centres should not depend entirely on police patrolling. As a business organisation, they ought to take adequate measures to guarantee the safety of women as mandated by the amendment to the Factories Act. The amendment to the Act which allows women to work between 10 pm and 6 am in Information Technology (IT) among other sectors, clearly puts the onus of ensuring safety of women employees on the employer.