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Gender, choice and constraint in call centre employment

Abstract

This paper examines the genderised experience of employment in call centres. While existing studies have acknowledged structural and agential constraints on women in the workplace, this paper goes further by illustrating the gendered nature of career choice and progression in a context which in certain respects appears to have benefitted women's desires for advancement. Drawing on quantitative and in-depth qualitative data from four Scottish call centres, the study provides evidence of gender inequality shaped by structural and ideological workplace and household constraints.

Introduction

Convergence in the qualifications and lifestyles of men and women (Wajcman and Martin, 2002) along with more opportunities for flexible entry to and exit from the labour market, were hoped to progressively eradicate gender inequality in employment (Beck, 2000; Castells, 2000). Women indeed appear more 'free' than ever to choose their employment paths; but they are nevertheless still more likely to be employed in less secure and lower paying jobs while men continue to dominate in higher status occupations (Stanworth, 2000).

Using call centre workplaces to examine gender differences in work preferences and experiences, this article argues that an interplay of factors perpetuates gender inequality. As a relatively new sector with a predominantly female workforce, it might be expected that call centres offer opportunities for women and provide role models for advancement. Previous research partially confirms this proposition (Belt, 2002) although contradictorily call centres have also been labelled 'ghettos' of female employment implying inferiority in skill and job quality and a lack of opportunity for their 'inhabitants' to leave. Kerfoot and Korczynski's

(2005) appeal for further research on women in service occupations is grounded in a recognition of the potential for continuing gender role stereotyping by service organisations and more widely at societal level.

We build on existing studies of women in call centres (Belt, 2002; Belt et al, 2002; Durbin, 2006) that have demonstrated structural and agential constraints on women by interrogating in nuanced manner the domestic and organisational constraints impacting women's experiences and choices. The paper begins by considering call centre growth and its implications for women's employment, before presenting two contrasting positions explaining women's call centre careers: firstly, that these are shaped by women's own preferences and any observed differences are a result of these choices, and secondly, that domestic and workplace arrangements constrain choice and progress. These arguments are then explored through an empirical study based on in-depth qualitative and survey data from four Scottish call centres. The findings permit reflection upon new economy predictions that gender inequality in work opportunities is a relic of past employment structures.

Call centre growth and women's employment

The origins and rapid diffusion of the call centre have been analysed fully elsewhere (Deery and Kinnie, 2004; Ellis and Taylor, 2006), but it is important to acknowledge the integration of telephonic and computer technologies which, essentially, enabled the industrialisation of customer servicing (Marshall and Richardson, 1996). This innovation marked out the call centre as a distinctive form of work organisation, perhaps best characterised as a unique hybrid of clerical/office and interactive service work (Boreham et al, 2008).

In the UK, path-breaking initiatives in financial services in the late-1980s demonstrated the profitable potential of this relatively new paradigm of customer contact. Call centres rapidly became central to many organisations' pursuit of competitive advantage,

providing a lean, flexible, low-cost means of delivering high volume customer interaction. Rates of employment growth accelerated throughout the 1990s and the UK government predicted a total workforce of 1 million by 2007 (DTI, 2004: 26).

In the early 2000s, women comprised around two-thirds of the call centre workforce (Belt et al, 2002: DTI, 2004: 61). Although distinct from pre-existing types of clerical or service work, the constructions of social competency associated with call centre work are decidedly gendered (Belt, 2002) and draw upon traditions of female-dominated employment and established sexual divisions of labour. In short, there are continuities. Huws (1999) saw customer service representatives as the Taylorised progeny of earlier generations of women office workers, whether bank tellers, ledger clerks, booking clerks or telephone operators. Women traditionally dominated clerical and cashier grades in financial services (Rubery et al., 1992), the sector with more call centre jobs than any other. Another organisational antecedent was the telephone switchboard with its overwhelmingly female operator workforce (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). To these we might add diverse female-dominated occupations in the front and back offices of mail order businesses, the travel and holiday sectors, utilities and leisure industries. There is no escaping this historical legacy of the modern office, the impact of mechanisation and new technology and the creation of a feminised, low-status and frequently deskilled clerical labour force (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Nevertheless, care must be taken to avoid caricaturing call centre work as de-skilled. Authors highlight the importance of personality characteristics, communication skills, appropriate attitudes and tacit knowledge (Belt, 2002; Belt et al., 2002; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Durbin, 2006), soft skills that derive from women's putative attributes.

Before uncritically applying a gender stereotype, it is worth noting that increasing numbers of call centre employees are male. Longitudinal data from Scotland, the focus of the present study, demonstrates a recent decline in the share of female employment with an

increase in the proportion of men employed from 33 per cent in 1997 to 42 per cent in 2008 (Taylor and Anderson, 2008: 32). This study suggested that the trend may be related to a decline in employers' utilisation of part-time and temporary staff - from 36 per cent in 1997 to 27 per cent by 2008. Tendencies to a sexual division (or divisions) of labour within call centre work underscores the dangers of simplistic characterisation. Although no genderised taxonomy has been developed, some data exists on the relative 'maleness' or 'femaleness' of specific activities. Reflecting broader trends within the so-called knowledge economy, males appear disproportionately concentrated (69 per cent) in IT roles such as technical help-desk work (Taylor and Anderson, 2008: 32). In financial services males dominate higher-end positions such as stockbroking (59 per cent) in contrast to female domination (80 per cent) of basic customer service roles. Notable female concentrations are found in the travel, transport and holiday sectors (70 per cent) and local government (79 per cent). Overall, women are disproportionately represented in 'pure' customer service.

'Choosing' call centre employment

Preference theories insist that women exercise a degree of personal choice in decisions to work part-time, take career breaks or remain in lower level roles (Hakim, 2002). Many women, it is held, simply prioritise domestic commitments, preferring 'low-commitment' employment and accepting lower rewards from paid work. Similarly, human capital or orthodox dual labour market approaches hold that decisions to opt for low quality work reflect a choice about investing in training and career progression (Mincer and Polachek, 1974), and action or agency perspectives (Evetts, 2000) depict women as active agents in the construction of their career, albeit careers that do not reflect organisational or professional progression. While action perspectives acknowledge constraints in the form of familial roles or organisational barriers, the analytical focal point is the way that women proactively

manage and create their own careers with preferences and expectations which themselves shape the observed order. According to these perspectives, the gendered nature of call centre employment is a manifestation of personal choices.

Superficially, the flexibility offered by call centres appears attractive for women seeking flexible shiftwork and convenient travel to work. Women returners certainly comprise an important workforce cohort, although the largest proportion consists of women in their mid-to-late 20s, often with few qualifications but strong notions of a career (Belt et al., 2002; Richardson and Howcroft, 2006). Students seeking part-time work and new graduates also form significant groups. Thus, the call centre seems to provide an outlet for significant numbers of women with career aspirations, showing, perhaps, convergence with the work values of men, as found across occupations (Rowe and Snizek, 1995). At least, it seems that in call centres many women reject an absolute homemaker role in favour of independence and career (Hochschild, 2003).

The case for constrained choice

Constrained choice on the domestic front

Contrary to personal preference theories, women's choices may reflect a process of continuous adaptation to limited options and changing life priorities. Crompton and Harris (1999) describe 'satisficers' as women who consciously scale down either employment or family life in order to accommodate demands from both. These women can certainly be found in call centres (Belt, 2002).

Although the dual-income household model appears the norm (Bradley, et al., 2000), having a family still affects women more than men in terms of labour force participation and career prospects. Even short breaks for maternity leave and childcare can lead to discontinuous careers, unchallenging jobs, and lower lifetime earnings (Hardill and Watson,

2004; Rake, 2000). The division of household labour also remains unequal, despite significant change over recent decades (Harkness, 2008; Sullivan, 2000). Data continues to show an ‘ideology of domesticity’ (Crompton, 2006) and a ‘second shift’ of domestic labour (Hochschild, 1989) irrespective of employment status. The disproportionate drop in income for many women when they become mothers is additionally disadvantageous given the unequal distribution of domestic, particularly child-rearing, duties within dual-career households (Dex, 2003; Hardill and Watson, 2004; Hochschild and Machung, 1989). Constraints on women’s choices about work inevitably follow. Women are more likely to experience role conflict between career and family (Crompton, 2002), invest time in the family at the expense of work (Maume, 2006), or have to deal with the logistics of accessible childcare (McRae, 1999). Women’s choices to work fewer hours or take career breaks may result from having no other option or for short-term convenience, and career decisions, rather than being goal-orientated, tend to be made incrementally as responses to uncertainties about family or relationships (Pascall et al., 2000). Flexible working times and convenient locations offered by call centres accommodate life by enabling relatively easy entry and exit from the workplace. This perspective contrasts with a dominant ‘masculine breadwinner mentality’ of career choice (Kelan, 2008) which privileges an individualised worker focusing on full-time work and with the freedom to invest in their human and social capital.

This does not deny the existence of distinct values with respect to work and family; for instance, family identity may hold more importance for women’s self-perception. Bagger et al. (2008) found that women experienced lower family-to-work interference due to strong family identity, while for men family identity was still associated with the traditional male breadwinner role. Nevertheless, women’s choices also seem to be socialised and reinforced by structural and cultural forces, and, accordingly, we must consider the practical constraints of the division of household and childcare labour on call centre career choice.

Gendered workplaces

Ideological and structural forces within the workplace also shape women's ambitions, and create an hegemony of masculine values concerning acceptable work roles and career paths. Also relevant are management or organizational cultures which devalue or exploit female characteristics or restrict women's access to influential or skilled positions through implicit stereotyping and discrimination (see, for example, Bradley, 2007; Calas and Smircich, 1990).

The processes by which this occurs are not directly discriminatory. Government policy and legislation promote equality of opportunity and the adoption of flexible, child-friendly working practices. However, implementation of such policies, especially within private sector organisations, is generally voluntary and variable (Noon and Hoque, 2004), and may be harder to regulate in the more fluid structures and working relations typified by newer organisational forms, thereby introducing a more invisible threat to gender equality than was present in earlier bureaucratic structures (Hebson and Grugulis, 2005; Stanworth, 2000). The upshot may be to prioritise career opportunities which are more easily accessible by men and amplify any consequent disadvantage for women.

Existing studies of women's careers in call centres (Belt, 2002; Belt et al, 2002; Baldry et al., 2007; Durbin, 2006) have noted structural barriers to progression, such as the absence of female role models at senior levels and the lack of convenient career progression opportunities. Durbin identifies cultural barriers such as norms about women's skills or ambitions, reflecting the more general stereotype that women possess the social skills required for service-based work. The outcome is a gendering of the qualities considered necessary for service encounters (Cameron, 2000) with clichéd female traits of 'caring, communicating and making people feel good' (Bradley et al., 2000: 78) increasingly considered essential for interactive service work. Belt et al. (2002:26) illustrated how women

consciously used feminine qualities to calm down angry customers or persuade men to buy products using ‘a flirty way of selling’, while women may be better equipped to go beyond prescribed scripts to deal with unexpected situations, reflecting the multidimensional skilled emotion managers described by Boyd and Bolton (2003). However, this assumption may also lead to the targeting of women in recruitment, perhaps those with suitable domestic circumstances, such as mature ‘returnees’ (Belt, 2002) or the ‘right attitude’ (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002), and, ultimately, the concentration of women in lower status and often stressful areas of call centre work.

A further consequence, despite the implied complexity of skill required to manage customer encounters, is the stereotyping and downgrading of ‘feminine’ skills associated with emotion work (Bolton, 2004). Hampson and Junor (2005) propose that it is women’s ‘invisibility’ in customer service encounters which adds to the gendering process. Gender segregation is evident in high-skilled occupations where women are less likely to be found in management posts, have lower salaries, and are often overlooked for prestigious work (e.g. Adam, et al., 2004). In call centres, men may dominate training or job opportunities perceived to involve different skills (e.g. technology or management) and thus may more rapidly rise away from lower status work (Durbin, 2006).

Finally, unlike male colleagues, female agents are often expected to deal with sexual flirtation and comments which they experience as demeaning or harassing (Buchanan and Koch-Shulte, 2000). Brannan (2005) found that performance for both males and females was based on cultivating an implicit sexualised relationship with clients (e.g. overt flirting or using ‘womanly charm’), often encouraged by team leaders in order to achieve competitive targets. Not only is performance appraised differently, gendered notions of skill become an ideological assumption where women accept their own suitability for service.

Research questions

Gender neutral perspectives, such as preference theory, would expect to find little evidence of disadvantaging role segmentation in call centres, and where it existed would conclude that it is attributable to women's own preferences and career orientations. Alternative arguments point to constrained choices resulting from domestic and workplace relations. We explore these alternative positions in four case study organisations, guided by the following questions:

1. Is there evidence of gendered role segmentation?
2. If there is role segmentation, is it attributable to (a) work preferences, (b) choices based on domestic circumstance or (c) gendered management and cultures?
3. To what extent do explanations reflect individual agency or situational constraint and material disadvantage for women in call centre employment?

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used within four Scottish call centres, representative of the sector in location, establishment/workplace size and product/service. These were workplaces of over 200 employees in city centre or small town locations representing financial services (Moneyflow), outsourcing service providers (Thejobshop), telecomms/entertainment (Entcomm) and travel (Holstravel).

Data collection took place in 2002, a period of relative growth for the industry, when call centres employed 1 in 40 of the Scottish workforce (Taylor and Anderson, 2008).

Qualitative data comprised 251 exploratory interviews or observations and 77 semi-structured workplace interviews with 27 men and 50 women. Of these, 38 were married or cohabiting, 36 were single and 18 were team leaders/managers. While exploratory interviews captured the broad work experiences of CSAs and managers, in-depth semi-structured interviews

involved selected samples representing different grades, ages, gender, tenures and locations. These interviews explored three themes related to the research questions: (a) career biographies and choices (b) experiences in the present company (career prospects, management) and (c) work-life linkages (relative importance of work and career, domestic arrangements). Exploratory and semi-structured interviews and observation notes were analysed for evidence supporting the respective competing theoretical explanations for job roles and career patterns.

In order to capture the patterns of gender roles, attitudes and workforce profile, a questionnaire was distributed to all employees over several weeks to account for different shifts, sick/holiday leave, and variable work patterns. Closed and open-ended questions asked about previous jobs (type, location, duration), reasons for present job choice (career decision, convenience, chance), current view of job (career within company, career in other companies), career satisfaction (Warr et al., 1979), division of household labour, and perceptions of equal treatment. A total of 1476 questionnaires was distributed with a high average response rate (64 per cent; N=855). Given no apparent pattern of non-response, this was considered representative of these centres' workforce.

Women made up 70 per cent of respondents although proportions varied by call centre (Table 1). The majority of respondents was on permanent contracts, had school/college qualifications, worked more than 30 hours per week and was aged under 30, although a sizable proportion of both men and women (41 per cent) was over 30 (mainly 31-40). Those working part-time were more likely to be women and have children or care responsibilities; working mothers comprised 34 per cent of the sample. Men and women were equally likely to work night shifts but significantly more women (62 per cent) than men (49 per cent) worked weekend shifts ($\chi^2(1)=11.56, p<.001$). Almost half came from previous sales/service

jobs and a sizable proportion was university graduates. Over half reported less than two years tenure although at Thejobshop, the newest site, over half were employed for less than a year.

TABLE 1

Findings

Role segmentation

Although the workforce in all centres was predominantly female men were over-represented in team leader and higher status roles (Table 2), while women were concentrated in high-volume and lower complex customer-facing work. In Entcomm, men were more likely to be found in technical departments (e.g. digital migration) or selected for special projects, such as maintaining databases to service the Quality Process Team, a position occupied by a late-40s male who had progressed from part-time CSA status in 2.5 years. Such roles required an aptitude for operating IT systems and analyzing error, efficiency and quality data, rather than customer service skills, and there was ‘healthy competition’ for selection into ‘expert’ teams (Quality Manager). In Moneyflow, women benefitted from a well-defined career pathway from the non-secured section, where CAs handled incoming calls on various ‘unregulated’ products, to ‘secured loans’, where Financial Planning Advisers (FPAs) and Mortgage Advisors dealt with small numbers of clients (averaging four daily) and could achieve quasi-professional financial planner qualifications. However, male over-representation was also evident here.

In the more gender-balanced outsourcing service provider, Thejobshop, agents were spread across numerous business accounts involving diverse clients and helpdesk services. Pay was maintained within a benchmarked range to avoid disparities, yet there was still an internal hierarchy of jobs. In ‘prestige’ business accounts (Bluechip, Gamesco), team leader and technical IT helpline roles were predominantly male (70+ per cent). Bluechip provided UK telephone-based services, including pre-sales and technical support, for a US

multinational computer software company. CSAs were expected to deliver customised, ‘quality’ service to high-value customers, and were distinguished from other agents in developing closer relationship with clients through secondment or client-based training. The same applied at Gamesco which provided technical services for a games console manufacturer.

By contrast, businesses involving short duration customer service calls were dominated by women (73 per cent); Energycom, a utilities section, employed 75 CSAs on inbound sales and customer care, and Genbusiness comprised seven micro-volume businesses (from baby clothes supplies to government agencies). Even at Bluechip there was gender segmentation, as the ‘call-facing’ section of Bluechip which channelled calls to technical support was noticeably the only all female group in the centre. This section was separated from the prestigious Bluechip agents (downstairs and behind screens) and was referred to by its male team leader as ‘only the switchboard, not the experts upstairs’.

Thus, in each call centre, men tended to migrate from customer-facing roles to promoted or higher status posts. Further evidence of segmentation and perhaps of a glass ceiling for women can be seen from Table 3. Women reported longer tenure and remained as unpromoted call-handlers longer than men (29 and 20 months respectively). Although periods were longer for those with dependents regardless of gender, it is the difference between men and women without dependents which is notable. Even younger women without the constraint of dependents stayed as call-handlers longer than men in equivalent circumstances.

TABLE 2

TABLE 3

Work preferences and career orientation

For employees without dependents, there were few gender differences in reasons for taking their present job (Table 1). Women with dependents, who saw their current jobs as long-term

but not necessarily part of a company career, were more likely to cite their choice as one of 'convenience' although an equal proportion (41 per cent) also cited their job choice as a 'career decision'. Twenty-three per cent wished to progress internally to team leader or higher skilled sections. Men were more likely to favour careers elsewhere ($\chi^2(1)=5.69$, $p<.05$) but there was no indication of women as more dissatisfied with their careers (Table 3).

Career aspirations were strongest in Moneyflow, where 40 per cent of respondents wished for internal promotion. Its defined career pathways, even for those on temporary contracts, prompted one FPA team leader to comment:

I think the company is very good - it gives you chances. If you are good and you can show that you are good then they will develop you (Moneyflow:5).

The training for FPAs was recognised by the Financial Standards Authority and provided support for 12 months study. On completion, employees were highly marketable within the financial sector. Similarly, for Thejobshop's Bluechip employees, off-the-job client-provided training resulted in certification recognised by employers beyond the call centre. Women were just as likely as men to value opportunities for training and career progression, albeit that this was orientated more towards internal advancement.

This focus on internal advancement, however, met the additional barrier of flat hierarchical structures and competition for the very few promoted positions. The majority of team leaders within Moneyflow had been in post since the call centre was established and those interviewed had no intention of moving due to the favourable salary. Even in Thejobshop's flagship account, Bluechip, there was one Customer Operations Manager for every 170 CSAs.

An emphasis on performance targets rather than personal development and career planning made this internal focus more problematic for women's career aspirations. Formal Performance, Development and Reward systems were implemented sporadically and no

transparent criteria or specific competencies were identified for progression. Intermediary positions, such as Moneyflow's induction trainers, Entcomm's call quality associates, or Thejobshop's Product Knowledge Coaches, emerged informally. Agents with good communication skills were selected by team leaders to perform these roles, for no additional payment, such as one in Thejobshop who was 'pulled aside one day' and offered the role of team champion.

Management's approach to career progression was driven by changing business priorities and restructuring. Entcomm's case is typical. High turnover and cutbacks led to a national downsizing programme called 'Planning for Growth' with training managers replaced by temporary positions, such as deputy team leader or 'superwalkers', often lasting several months without additional incentive. Selection for team leader development required meeting 'all objectives'; 96 per cent attendance, no disciplinary record, and recommendation by a line manager. The company's middle management development programme, 'Explorer', was difficult to access for some staff, and held no promise of advancement or additional pay on completion. This part-time CSA who eventually gained access described her frustration.

It's allowed me to do my job better, but not allowed me to progress anywhere. I mean it's been done, it's been recognized, they took us for a meal and they gave us certificates which was very nice, but it doesn't let me go anywhere, it's left me dangling again (Entcomm:25).

The HR assistant acknowledged serious issues with Entcomm's approach to development and succession planning. Of every 200 applicants for team leader positions, only one or two were successful and Explorer had failed to identify CSAs and provide opportunities to progress.

Career choice as domestic order

The women employed in these call centres were more likely to have dependents or care responsibilities than the men (Table 1) suggesting that call centres were a more attractive employment option for women with domestic constraints than for men in similar positions. Even so, once men with dependents had entered the call centres, they were the most likely to value a company career, even more than women without dependents (Table 3). One explanation is that men remained primary breadwinners. For women with dependents, flexible shifts were primarily convenient for accommodating domestic responsibilities, a point supported by the larger proportion of women working weekends. An entire evening shift at Entcomm also comprised women with daytime family responsibilities. Working mothers also preferred to remain in one organization without promotion, particularly one that was geographically convenient.

I am happy with the people that I work with and in general the job is quite a simple job to do for the money that we are getting. Plus it's only five minutes up the road (Entcomm:2).

That these women may have viewed their jobs as a secondary source of household income is confirmed by further analysis (Table 4). Amongst those with dependents, men contributed a larger proportion of income to the household; 68 per cent of women contributed half or less of household income compared to 30 per cent of men. Even women working full-time continued to bear responsibility for most domestic chores - care of elderly/sick relatives, cooking, shopping, cleaning and washing/ironing. When asked who took responsibility for daily housework many females responded without hesitation 'me'. One male team leader, whose wife worked two days a week, confessed,

I do nothing. It's as simple as that. Maybe at the weekend I'll make a meal ... but the general intensive housework, shopping etc is done by Lorraine (Entcomm:4).

TABLE 4

Thus, women seemed more likely to sacrifice work for family, while the opposite appears true for fathers. This pattern applied also to women without dependents, like this older woman with no children who regarded her work as the secondary income for the household:

Mine's [salary] is pocket money. He earns enough for us to live a very good lifestyle.

At this stage in my life I am now working to keep some company (Holstravel:28).

Other women commented that a demanding career path was not sustainable without sacrificing domestic order. Many 'older' women described their job choice as intentionally 'scaling down', while female managers described the expectations associated with supervisory roles and the greater willingness of young males to accept the increased pressure.

You have got to do extra work at home...I knew that when I took the job on. It's not a 9-5 (Moneyflow:9, team manager).

Young boys. They are probably the ones that want to get on in the company.

They are in their late twenties. I would say they are the three that do want to climb up.

Julie and I - when we are finished with telesales – it'll be a position level to what we have got just now, but no more stress (Moneyflow:6, team leader).

This reluctance to sacrifice domestic order for career may reflect a continuation of patriarchal values, with women fulfilling a traditional homemaking role or a career secondary to their partners. Fathers also raised domestic reasons for their choices, but mainly as breadwinners, 'paying for the mortgage'. Many men described the job as transitional, consistent with their shorter tenures which were shown in survey responses (Table 3).

I've already done 10 years of call centres, money broking, the stock exchange. The main reasons for working in Bluechip are 1 money and 2 the learning of new technology. I shall learn and then move on (Thejobshop, male Corporate Tele-business Advisor).

Gendered workplaces

Equality policies

Women did not perceive themselves as disadvantaged. Ninety four per cent of women compared to 76 per cent of men felt that men and women were treated the same by managers. Only four per cent of women felt they were treated worse but 20 per cent of men felt they were sometimes or always treated better. Predictably, explanations for this divergence do not lie in formal policy. There were documented equal opportunities policies in Moneyflow, Holstravel and Thejobshop. Moneyflow was a founding member of 'Opportunity 2000', an initiative aimed at improving women's representation at management levels and increasing line managers' responsibility for implementation. This promoted open access to training and development, objective competency-based selection, 'career break' schemes which held positions open, job-sharing, crèche facilities, and flexible working arrangements (e.g. enhanced maternity leave and a returner's bonus of £100/month for mothers to offset childcare costs). The company claimed that over 75 per cent of women returned to work following maternity leave. Moneyflow's centre manager elaborated on the opportunities she had received:

I think I have always been judged on my ability to do my job. I have never been made conscious of the fact that I'm a female...I joined Moneyflow in the 1970s where there was certainly opportunity around for discrimination, or for you to be made feel that you maybe were going to be judged in a different way (Moneyflow:8).

Holstravel's sexual harassment policy emphasised management responsibility for ensuring compliance, and allowed for flexitime, absence, maternity/parental leave, and a career break scheme (particularly for childrearing and caring for the elderly). A similar 'Fairness at Work' document existed at Thejobshop.

Gendered workplaces

Evidence indicates that two aspects of the workplace experience adversely affected women. The first relates to the uncertainties of shift systems which were often enforced by a ‘macho’ senior management culture, especially in Moneyflow and Thejobshop. Although many women were attracted by flexible hours, they seemed most likely to suffer from complex shifts which conflicted with the aspirations of formal equality initiatives. Varying between days, early mornings and evenings, shifts were dictated by call volumes, and individuals were left to negotiate changes at short notice with co-workers through self-rostering. Interference with family life was widely reported.

[The shift pattern] gets in the way...I’m doing an awful lot of late shifts like one to nine. Really I don’t find it very convenient because I get the bus now and I don’t get home until after ten at night...I don’t like my mum to be alone until that time herself (Moneyflow:3, female CA).

Hardline management attitudes, even amongst females, exacerbated the effects. At Moneyflow, a senior manager commented ‘good management is about getting more from less, or in our case, considerably more’, pointing to the pressure she felt to adjust to customer demand and new market entrants by increasing evening shift work at short notice. At Thejobshop, the culture was summed up by this comment from a female senior manager whose response to agents’ desire for crèche facilities was ‘you don’t want to encourage them on that’.

A second theme was that many managers and operators saw front-line customer service work as ‘women’s work’, to the extent that certain female profiles were intentionally targeted in recruitment. A team leader in Thejobshop viewed older female agents as ‘less stressed’ and ‘adding to teamworking skills’. At Moneyflow, an induction trainer described the typical ‘laddish’ behaviour and crosstalk of young men (discussing last night’s football or

the latest filthy mnemonics devised to memorise data) compared to the seriousness of women trainees. CSAs themselves associated women with the necessary skills for handling difficult customers; this agent in her 50s described her resilient approach.

I can let a customer scream away and let them rattle on until they are finished and then say now I'll help you...it's just [my] past experience; that's why I can cope with it. There was one boy, he took everything personally; we used to try and calm him down and say it is not you they are getting at, but he felt he wasn't doing his job. He would eventually lose the rag with a customer and start shouting back (Entcomm:1).

Entcomm targeted women returners on local college IT courses in a deliberate effort to reduce turnover. Role play and personal skills assessment were part of all selection procedures, with qualifications and technical skills downplayed. Early stages were outsourced to agencies, but final interviews involving team leaders implicitly favoured women by questioning why applicants found the job attractive and what would make them more likely to remain in post. Women were viewed as possessing relevant soft skills and attitudes, such as willingness to endure negative aspects of the job, and to be seeking convenience and shifts to accommodate domestic situations.

Once employed, gendered notions of competence may have been reinforced because of the dominance of women already employed. 'The boys', in the minority, were regarded as less suited to these roles and consequently were more likely to move on to more challenging or specialised positions.

Integration: the nature of gender disadvantage in call centres

Even though women dominated numerically in these call centres, and formal policy and practices promoted opportunities for women, men were more likely to progress to technical or higher status jobs, while women remained in customer-facing roles. We examined three

potential explanations for this: (1) that women's own work preferences determined their choices; (2) that choices were made within the context of domestic constraints; or (3) that gendered organisational practices and assumptions shaped women's position.

Differences in work orientation could not explain role segmentation; women were just as career-orientated as men, only differing in their preference for advancement in their present company rather than elsewhere. We found more support for (2) and (3). Domestic circumstance influenced women's choices about employment more than for men, and for many, accounted for their current job choice. Women followed a different career logic (Pascall, et al., 2000) influenced more by balancing personal and work demands.

Women's disadvantage extended to the workplace where they experienced, and accepted, stereotypical notions of women's suitability for service roles or ambitions to take on more demanding roles (Belt, et al., 2002; Durbin, 2006). Recruitment strategies led to self-selection of those in particular domestic situations (Belt, 2002; Callaghan and Thompson, 2002), while competency-based selection created a facade of objectivity and was overshadowed by methods targeting and favouring women. Once employed, women appeared to adjust to the demands of front-line work - variable shift systems and limited tangible opportunities to progress within existing structures – with career aspirations restricted under the pervasive mass production paradigm and cost efficiency logic of the call centre (Taylor, et al., 2002).

How might we explain men's trajectories away from the phones? For women in male-dominated professions such as civil engineering, progression often depends on being 'allowed into a man's world', for example, by working long hours or 'pub going' (Watts, 2009). Simpson's (2004) account of men in diverse female-dominated occupations suggests that men draw on discourses outwith the feminine ones of service and care, to re-establish masculinity by re-labelling their work or seeking status enhancement. In these call centres, men were more

likely to pursue the infrequent advancement opportunities, and generally distanced themselves from what is typically thought of as feminine work.

Implications and conclusions

Despite the pejorative description of call centres as female ghettos, it has also been argued that their feminisation has benefitted women's careers by restricting competition from men and providing opportunities and role models for advancement (Belt, 2002). Analysis confirms the diverse composition of the female workforce by qualifications, age groups, domestic conditions and career which might support a picture of opportunity and choice. However, the study also illustrates the genderised micro-organisation of work, both at the point of service delivery (in the nature of work and management cultures typical of call centres) as well as domestically. Previous work (Belt, 2002; Belt, et al., 2002; Durbin, 2006) helpfully indicates the structural and agential constraints on women, suggesting the existence of a glass ceiling. This study goes further by showing in nuanced terms how women's progression within call centres suffers as a result of organisational and domestic constraints as well as the conjuncture of labour market opportunity offered by this new sector and limited availability of jobs at particular times. Career opportunities are circumscribed, and escape routes from the phones are themselves genderised.

The study contributes to debates about choice and agency versus structural constraint. Applying Hakim's (2000, 2002) perspective on women's employment to the call centre would lead to the implication that many gravitate towards part-time work with low pay and few career opportunities because they prefer lower work demands and work-life balance. What appears as women's personal choices, however, are shown to be constrained or satisficing (Corby and Stanworth, 2009; Crompton and Harris 1998). Ransome (2007) would argue that seeing the career 'choice' as an enactment of conscious preference assumes too great a degree of

determinism in women's freedom to make decisions about work-life balance. Viewed instead in terms of a 'total responsibility burden', it is easier to see how women make constrained choices. Others, similarly, frame these choices in terms of life-quality decisions, coping strategies and a recognition of tradeoffs (Mickel and Dallimore, 2009), but usually for professionals with wider career options. For call centre women with fewer options, decisions may be made out of necessity, or prospects of limited career gains relative to those of a partner may be sacrificed in order to achieve greater control in their personal lives.

Like other analyses of gender in service work (Howcroft, 2008), this study suggests caution in assuming a diminution of disadvantage. Although qualifications were comparable and women equally career-orientated, men departed more rapidly than women from lower grade positions, a finding consistent with wider trends showing that women's wage growth is still considerably slower than men's due to their disproportionate presence in lower status feminized jobs (Dex et al, 2008). Moreover, progressive equality initiatives were easily sacrificed. Noon's (2007: 780) critique of the business case for diversity noted that the right to equality of opportunity often 'was qualified by an economic rationale'. This tendency was especially visible in Moneyflow, where pressures to increase targets filtered through the management of workflows and shifts, making the proclaimed focus on opportunities for women unsustainable.

In summary, despite their supposed potential for advancing women's careers, the realities of call centre employment for women appear to reproduce the patriarchal domestic and workplace relations of the past. Men, equally, re-enact gendered roles, attempting to distance themselves from 'women's' work, and management practice reinforces disadvantage through hegemonic ideas of women's suitability for front-line call centre work which makes them actively seek and encourage the status quo for women of a particular profile. All this suggests that new economy industries apparently offering greater equality of access and advancement

than those of the past cannot overcome these barriers, even when women themselves clearly wish to do so.

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Table 1 Survey respondents

	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
All call centres	241	30	567	70
Moneyflow	24	25	73	75
Thejobshop	104	48	114	52
Entcomm	62	26	175	74
Holstravel	41	18	188	82
Employee characteristics				
Age: 18-30	140	59	332	59
Age: 31 and over	96	41	228	41
Highest qualification: School/college/vocational	166	72	422	77
Highest qualification: Undergraduate/postgraduate	53	23	109	20
One or more dependents/care resp.	59	25	192	34
Job characteristics				
Permanent contracts	208	90	501	92
Team leader/mgt	42	18	62	11
Frequently work nights	74	32	151	28
Frequently work Sat/Sun	112	49	341	62
Contracted hours: 30 or more/week	215	93	460	84
Paid overtime (up to 10 hrs/wk)	33	14	83	15
Unpaid overtime (up to 10hrs/wk)	61	27	106	19
Reasons for job choice				
No choice/only one available	40	17	57	11
Convenience	77	34	224	41
Career decision	99	44	224	41
Career in other company	64	27	108	19
Better pay	7	3	19	4

Table 2 Job role

	Business analysts/ fin'l planners (n=26)					
	Managers (n=104)		Operators (n=636)		fin'l planners (n=26)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
All call centres	40%	60%	27%	73%	55%	45%
Entcomm (n=237)	39%	62%	25%	75%		
Holstravel (n=229)	19%	81%	18%	82%		
Moneyflow (n=97)	46%	54%	22%	78%		
Thejobshop (n=218)	54%	46%	46%	54%		

Table 3 Call centre career (operators only)

	Men (n=231)		Women (n=510)		F
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Tenure in call centre (months)	14.5	(12.1)	21.3	(16.9)	24.57**
No dependents	13.5	(11.2)	20.1	(16.3)	17.83**
Children/dependents	17.5	(14.1)	23.6	(17.8)	4.29*
Months in operator role (incl. previous call centres)	19.5	(21.9)	29.4	(30.1)	16.46***
No dependents	18.7	(18.1)	27.7	(31.8)	9.51**
Children/dependents	35.5	(36.1)	36.9	(37.5)	.05
Importance of company career					
No dependents	3.77	(1.03)	3.76	(.98)	.02
Children/dependents	4.07	(.99)	3.51	(.90)	7.93*
Satisfaction with:					
Career prospects	3.82	(1.53)	3.94	(1.42)	.87
Job variety	4.03	(1.49)	3.94	(1.51)	.46
Job security	4.37	(1.38)	4.57	(1.34)	2.70
Influence	4.01	(1.37)	4.09	(1.31)	.45
Sense of achievement	4.15	(1.49)	4.28	(1.50)	.96

Table 4 Household life

	Men		Women		χ^2
	N	%	N	%	
Contributes more than half/all to household income					
All sample	103	45	166	30	14.95 *
No dependents	63	37	110	30	2.38
Has dependents/care responsibilities	40	70	56	32	25.90 ***
Prime responsibility for:					
Children	58	22	163	30	5.24
Cooking	73	32	300	55	34.98 ***
Shopping	68	30	301	56	42.82 ***
Cleaning	53	23	313	58	77.46 ***
Washing/ironing	71	31	312	59	48.51 ***
Total	231	30	550	70	

Note: * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001