

**Women in Call Centres:
A Canadian Gender and Development Issue?**

**Nikko Snyder
December 12, 2001
Women in Development
York University**

Many Canadians have undoubtedly experienced feelings of annoyance and frustration upon answering the phone after a long day's work only to discover that the person calling is demanding their valuable time and/or money. This, to varying degrees, reflects many people's response to telemarketers. It is easy to forget that the person calling may be earning barely enough to survive, may have a family to support, and may not even be doing their job voluntarily. It is also likely that many Canadians have not experienced the feelings that many call centre workers face daily: dread at the prospect of dialing yet another number, or the anxiety of knowing they might be fired for not reaching their quota.

The latter were my own feelings during the two weeks I spent on a temporary contract working with four other young women as a telemarketer at an outbound call centre. Having to invade people's private homes to try to sell them a product so ridiculous that it was difficult to make it through my script, let alone complete a sale (I sold one package in the two weeks that I worked) made me feel miserable, anxious and powerless. The result was that I vowed never to do such demeaning work again.

And I haven't had to. I don't know what accounted for my good fortune, compared to the approximately 330,000 other people employed in 6,500 Canadian call centres that do not necessarily have the freedom to make such a decision¹. Perhaps it was my university education, my white privilege, or my youth. Regardless of what it was, I was left with a continuing empathy for telemarketers that I talk to and a disturbing fascination with the role that call centres play in Canadian society, and particularly in the lives of women.

It was in part this personal experience that inspired this work, the goal of which is to consider whether and to what extent work in the call centre industry represents an important gender and development issue in Canada. Although it is not known exactly how many Canadian women currently work in call centres, it is suspected that the majority of call centre workers are female, and that many of these women are in non-

¹ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 14

standard and/or vulnerable employment positions². There has been a notable lack of Canadian research done in the specific area of call centres as they relate to gender issues, with the first substantial work funded only recently by Status of Women Canada and published in 2000³. In this groundbreaking work, researchers Buchanan and Koch-Schulte reveal that call centre work does represent an important threat to the economic, physical and psychological well-being of the mostly women that work in the field. These findings are in direct contradiction to Objectives 2 and 3 of the Federal Government's 1995 Plan for Gender Equality, which are to "improve women's economic autonomy and well-being, and improve women's physical and psychological well-being"⁴. Thus, call centre work would appear to be positioned as an important gender issue in Canada.

The stated objective of Buchanan and Koch-Schulte's research is to "enhance public debate on gender equality issues and to enable individuals, organizations, policy makers and policy analysts to participate more effectively in the development of policy"⁵. To continue to help fulfill this objective, the purpose of this paper is to consider the strengths and limitations of the currently available research on the impact of call centre work on women in Canada, and to encourage further discussion. Specifically, I hope to consider the problems inherent in preparing research for the development of public policy. In addition, I aim to further elaborate on examples analyzed in Buchanan and Koch-Schulte's report to show that the current working conditions experienced by women working in Canadian call centres represent a broad problem for Canadian society: the erosion of the role of democratic citizenship for many working Canadians, and in particular Canadian women. Finally, I aim to interrogate the nature of call centres in Canada as a 'gender and development' issue, by considering the following dilemmas: Does Canada's status as a 'First World' nation exempt us from the possibility of facing domestic gender and development issues? If not, how do Canadian international development agencies reconcile the ongoing provision of funds and 'aid' to 'Third

² Ibid., pp. 9-10

³ Buchanan, Ruth & Sarah Koch-Schulte. 2000. *Gender on the Line: Technology, Restructuring and the Reorganization of Work in the Call Centre Industry*. Status of Women Canada's Policy Research Fund.

⁴ Status of Women Canada, 1995, pp. 7

⁵ Buchanan, 2000, pp. iv

World' countries when domestic gender issues exist that are not being adequately addressed?

There are several obvious limitations to the research of Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, and these are primarily the result of their work being the first of its kind in Canada. They themselves acknowledge that quantitative data was largely unavailable and that the scope of the project was narrow (only three call centres were studied, for the most part qualitatively). In light of this, it is not the intention of this work to criticize their research, but rather to consider the existence of limitations that may, at first glance, be less apparent. Specifically, because the stated intention of the work is to enable the effective development of public policy, the form and content of the findings must necessarily be limited so that they are easily communicable to policy makers. By stating this I am not implying that the validity of the work should be in any way undermined by their expressed hope of influencing policy makers. However, in their commitment to providing realistic, concrete and politically palatable recommendations, certain negative effects of call centre work on Canadian women may have been understated or left unaddressed. This may be most apparent in the report's use of language, which in certain instances downplays the political nature of the situation. For example, within the body of the report, the word 'power' is used only four times and the word 'freedom' only once. The avoidance of these politically charged words seems striking in a political discussion about poverty, unemployment and devaluation that also raises important questions about women's roles as free citizens in a democratic society. The overall impact of the work is weaker as a result, and I would argue that we are left without a full sense of the seriousness of the situation. If this is a necessity for the effective communication of policy recommendations, one must ask: if those at the margins of society (e.g., women, minorities, poor people, etc.) have necessarily to move towards the centre to communicate, what of the most marginalized extremes be lost in the process? The purpose of this paper is to take the fine work of Buchanan and Koch-Schulte to another level, one that considers what lies closer to the margins and may not be as palatable to policy makers. Whereas Buchanan and Koch-Schulte's "underlying impetus is a concern

for fairness and substantive equality in workplace opportunities”⁶, the impetus of this paper is to go a step further, by considering the more overarching systemic problems that are faced by many women working in the call centre industry in Canada.

Although it is not the purpose of this work to reiterate the findings of Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, it is necessary to provide some background information on the situation of women in the Canadian call centre industry, based on their research. Their study examines the impact of globalization and economic restructuring on the process of “feminization” of labour in Canada, and specifically focuses on how this feminization can and does occur within Canadian call centres. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte emphasize that the feminization of labour occurs in two phases: not only are more women participating in the labour market now than ever before, but as a result of economic restructuring the number of ‘feminized’ (read devalued) jobs has increased⁷.

In our case study, not only do more women perform low-paying call centre work, but call centre work itself is feminized—that is, it is structured as women’s work. Low pay and non-standard (part-time, temporary, or casual) terms of employment characterize feminized employment.⁸

This argument is echoed in *The Job-Poor Recovery: Social Cohesion and the Canadian Labour Market*, in which researchers Burke and Shields describe the ‘hourglass labour market’: “the kinds of jobs being created are undermining the foundation for middle class life in Canadian society”⁹. In other words, the jobs that are currently being created in Canada are, in general, more poorly compensated, less secure, and fall more and more into the category of non-standard employment¹⁰. As Ann Eyerman says, “there just

⁶ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 8

⁷ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 3-4

⁸ Ibid., pp. 64

⁹ Burke, 1999, pp. 1

¹⁰ “Some 45 percent of adult employees between the ages of 25-59 are employed in flexible forms of work (less than full-time tenured workers). This represents a highly polarized employment pattern. Flexible forms of employment (part-time, contract, full-time non-tenured) are on average between \$5 to \$8 per hour more poorly compensated than full-time workers with tenure; flexible workers lack job ladders and have few opportunities to increase their real income earning capacity over time.” (Burke & Shields, 1999, pp. 2)

aren't enough good jobs to go around anymore"¹¹, with the result that more women *and* men are now doing devalued work. Women are disproportionately impacted by this trend¹², and this is compounded by the fact that the skills that women often bring to their work, such as listening, communication, 'people skills' etc., are in many cases considered to be 'natural talents' rather than valuable skills¹³.

According to Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, this tendency towards 'feminization' is clearly reflected within the Canadian call centre industry. Although comprehensive Canadian statistics remain unavailable, their findings reflect the reported reality in many call centres: more women are employed, a disproportionate number of employees are young (under 29), and a high number of positions are classified as non-standard (between 31% and 45%, in their case studies¹⁴). In addition, they found that none of the jobs encountered in their case studies fell into the category of 'good' jobs (full-time, well-compensated and secure) as defined by the 1990 Economic Council of Canada Report, *Good Jobs/Bad Jobs*¹⁵. Specifically, 'bad' call centre jobs were considered unsatisfactory for the following reasons: they were often difficult, insecure, low paying and unethical, with little training provided and limited opportunity for advancement. For these reasons, among others, call centre work was often seen to lead to stress, depression and 'burnout'. Because the people most likely to be negatively affected by this work are women, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte concluded that call centre work should be considered an important gender issue in Canada. This conclusion is most definitely strengthened by the work of researchers such as Eyerman¹⁶ and Burke and Shields¹⁷.

It is clear from this that many Canadian women currently face poverty, insecurity and powerlessness in the workplace. However, it is not possible to raise questions about how

¹¹ Eyerman, 2000, pp. 106

¹² "Single mothers, and more generally women, are significantly over represented among *flexible* workers and the *vulnerably* employed". (Burke and Shields, 1999, pp.2)

¹³ Buchanan, 2000, pp. vi

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 29

¹⁶ Eyerman, Ann. 2000. *Women in the Office: Transitions in a Global Economy*. Sumach Press: Toronto.

¹⁷ Burke, Mike & John Shields. 1999. *The Job-Poor Recovery: Social Cohesion and the Canadian Labour Market. A Research Report of the Ryerson Social Reporting Network* (Senior Researchers, Ryerson Social Reporting Network). Ryerson Polytechnic University: Toronto.

this powerlessness may impact and undermine women's roles as citizens in Canadian society without first exploring some key concepts. It is generally accepted that Canada, as an industrialized, Western First World nation, constitutes a democratic society. Defined literally, democracy means "a form of government in which the power resides with the people, and is exercised by them either directly or by means of elected representatives; a classless and tolerant form of society" that "favours social equality"¹⁸. If we assume that within a democracy the power to govern must necessarily lie in the hands of the people (citizens), Murray Bookchin's analogy of the body is very logical: "Popular assemblies are the minds of a free society; the administrators are the hands"¹⁹.

As members of Canadian democratic society, all citizens of Canada are equally afforded the formal right to vote in order to elect representatives to make decisions on our behalf. To question how well democracy is working we must ask whether these representatives are, in fact, acting as 'hands' that are controlled the people. In other words, do Canadian citizens have the collective power of voice to direct society? And is this collective voice made up of equally powerful individual voices, one for every citizen of Canada? Using the specific example of women in Canadian call centres, it becomes easy to see that the social and political equality of voices should not be taken for granted.

Beyond "the fact of being a citizen of a country"²⁰, citizenship in a democracy such as Canada must be understood to come about through participation in the governance of society. This participation occurs not only by having a public voice with which to speak, but also by *using* that voice to participate equally with other citizens. There are those who question whether formal rights, such as the right to vote, provide people who are less powerful in society (e.g., women, minorities, etc.) with the opportunity to participate equally. This question of what it means to be included as a citizen is elaborated on by Dhaliwal:

...many subordinated groups have been 'included' by being accorded

¹⁸ The Canadian Oxford Dictionary

¹⁹ Bookchin, 1989, pp. 175

²⁰ The Canadian Oxford Dictionary

certain formal rights like the right to vote. If inclusionary attempts often reaffirm ‘a hegemonic core to which the margins are added without any significant destabilization of that core’ or continue to valorize the very center that is problematic to begin with, it is clear that the motivation to include needs questioning.²¹

Although they may not agree with Dhaliwal enough to question the ‘hegemonic core’ at the centre of democracy, the Federal Government of Canada does appear to submit that many Canadian women are not currently provided with adequate opportunities for full participation in society. This is expressed as objective 6 of the 1995 Federal Plan for Gender Equality: “‘Incorporate Women’s Perspectives in Governance’ - contributes to achieving the *active participation* of women from diverse experiences and fields, and *equal access to all levels of decision making*”²². We must inquire whether the government’s definitions adequately reflect how Canadian women define their own access and participation. Most importantly, we must ask if and how this government objective is actually affecting the lives of women who experience powerlessness in their lives and work.

Is it too big a leap to consider the possibility that powerlessness in the workplace may reflect broader powerlessness as citizens? “The labour market, we must remember, is a social as well as an economic institution”²³, and to this I would add that it is also a political institution. With this in mind it is not sufficient to dwell on the negative economic implications of current trends within many Canadian workplaces if the hope is to understand how all aspects of economic, social and political life are potentially impacted. It is instead necessary to examine how specific aspects of work may result in a controlling and silencing of voice that represents a broader undermining of democratic freedom. To this end, it is necessary to consider the meaning of concepts such as control, discipline, domination and hegemony as they exist within workplace environments.

²¹ Dhaliwal, 1996, pp. 44

²² Status of Women Canada, 1995, pp. 7 (my italics)

²³ Burke, 1999, pp. 3

Control can be defined as “the power of directing, command; the power of restraining, especially self-restraint; prevention of the spread of proliferation of something”²⁴. For the purpose of achieving efficiency in the workplace the control of voice, movement and social relations might all be necessary, and this control is most efficient if the workers themselves enforce it. Control may be achieved through discipline, or the “training, especially of the mind and character, aimed at producing self-control, obedience, orderly conduct, etc.; a system of rules used to maintain control over people, e.g., prisoners, military personnel, etc.”²⁵ The relationship between society and the disciplined individual is illustrated by John Fiske in his explanation of Foucault’s ‘docile bodies’:

Disciplined individuals (or docile bodies) are essential to the smooth running of an elaborate society and so those components of individuality which can best be disciplined are the ones which the power-bloc promotes as those which matter. Those over which its control is less effective are, conversely, defined as trivial and denied, as far as possible, social effectivity.²⁶

Thus, it follows that for a democratic, capitalist society such as Canada to run smoothly, certain aspects of an individual’s identity must be encouraged and others must be discouraged. This form of individuality, which is dictated from the top down (as opposed to identity that evolves from the bottom up) is what Foucault terms ‘individuation’: the power process by which an individual is separated from others for the purposes of “documentation, evaluation and control.”

The end result of this process is stationing – the placing of the individuated person in the position required by the social order... Individuation is a vertical power that separates and stations the body and thus works to control both its individuality and its social relations.²⁷

Although Fiske does not explicitly state that the process of individuation is a gender issue (or a race, ability or class issue), it is clear that social constructions such as gender and race necessarily relate to where individuals and groups are ‘stationed’ within the social

²⁴ The Canadian Oxford Dictionary.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Fiske, 1993, pp. 66

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 67-68

order. The process of stationing within the workplace may reflect, reinforce and even exacerbate the marginalization that certain groups experience in society, and this may perpetuate the marginalization of women, racial and ethnic groups, younger and/or older people, etc. This process must also necessarily impact the presence of voice in these groups, both individually and collectively.

In order to achieve individuation most efficiently, it is necessary that individuals participate in their own control through *self*-discipline. This may explain why so many academics look to Foucault's reference to Bentham's 18th century 'Panopticon' when considering the discipline of workers through modern-day electronic surveillance: if prisoners do not know when they are being watched, they will act as though they are being watched at all times²⁸. A tactic even more efficient than this is to naturalize discipline to the point where the individual understands no reason to act differently. An example of this would be to make the prisoner in the Panopticon so accustomed to their captivity that they would see no reason to leave their cell, even if suddenly freed.

It is this consent that distinguishes hegemony from domination²⁹. If powerlessness is made to appear natural, we may begin to accept that who they want us to be is who we actually are³⁰, and that their definitions of citizenship and democracy are the only definitions. At this point Dhaliwal's voice may begin to ring disturbingly true:

...Western countries such as the United States "own" the term or category "democracy" and use it to police or discipline countries not meeting the Western criteria. In this process, democracy is often measured by standards that are not only shifting, but are often unmet by Western countries themselves. Consequently, no matter what the United States

²⁸ John Fiske describes The Panopticon: "It was built like a wheel, with a supervisor's tower at the hub and 144 cells on six levels around the circumference. Each cell had a spy hole on the inside through which the supervisor could survey the behavior and body of its occupant... Because the prisoners could not see the supervisor and could not know when they were being watched or not they would have to behave as though they were being watched all the time and thus would monitor themselves." (Fiske, 1993, pp. 72-73)

²⁹ "Hegemony is a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership. It is the organisation of consent." (Roger, 1982, pp. 21)

³⁰ Fiske, 1993, pp. 68

does, because it “owns” democracy (as well as other terms such as “human rights”) it will appear democratic.³¹

Having raised questions about the nature of Canadian democracy, and specifically about whether and how all voices (especially women’s) are heard equally, it is now possible to draw on some specific examples that illustrate the control of women’s bodies and voices within the Canadian call centre industry. It is important to emphasize that the focus will be primarily on examples of ‘bad’ jobs in call centres, as they are defined by Buchanan and Koch-Schulte and the Economic Council of Canada. By their definition, “a ‘good job’ tends to require information-based skills, is full-time and well-remunerated, while a ‘bad job’ is characterized by lower pay and nonstandard forms of employment, including part-time, temporary or temp-agency work”³². Although Buchanan and Koch-Schulte admitted that their studies provided no examples of ‘good’ call centre jobs according to this definition, it is important to emphasize that some good jobs do exist, and that some people do have long-term careers in the call centre industry. However, even these people may experience some of the previously outlined ‘bad’ aspects of call centre work (see page 6).

The first specific example I would like to consider is the common use of dress codes within call centres. According to Buchanan and Koch-Schulte, although the reasons for enforcing the dress of ‘invisible workers’ were unclear, it did seem that the call centres that hired less educated workers and invested less in their employees “appeared more likely to rely on dress codes solely as a disciplinary mechanism, a way to keep a work force perceived as potentially ‘unruly’ under control”³³. This control of the unruly natural body is analyzed by Fiske, who distinguishes between bodies that are ‘aesthetic’ (perfected, official, symmetrical) and those that are ‘grotesque’ (incomplete, fertile, growing, disorderly, uncontrolled)³⁴. Not only do aesthetic bodies remain static and can therefore be ‘known’ and controlled, the process by which dress codes flatten out

³¹ Dhaliwal, 1996, pp. 50

³² “The ECC also observed that youth and women tended to be concentrated in the ‘bad jobs’” (ECC, 1990, p. 11).” (Buchanan, 2000, pp. 20)

³³ Ibid., 2000, pp. 37

³⁴ Fiske, 1993, 59

difference actually helps to define one acceptable common identity. This identity is naturalized in the sense that it has achieved perfection and “any change would be for the worse”³⁵. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte identify this perfected identity as “compulsory heterosexuality”³⁶. Not only does this naturalized perfection define how we identify as individuals, but by erasing difference it also impacts how we relate to others. Difference becomes something that needs to remain masked in order to exist successfully in the public realm of work.

Directly related to this stationing of the physical body within the confines of the ‘aesthetic’ is the tendency for call centre management to keep individuals separate by discouraging social networks among workers. According to Eyerman, “our association with a social group in the office helps us get our work done and gives us a margin of power in the otherwise powerlessness of our positions”³⁷. This can be equally true in call centre situations, however workers may be discouraged from connecting with co-workers because of the threat to control that is perceived by management³⁸. This is echoed by Fiske, who would categorize the social isolation of individuals as a process of individuation that helps to maintain and strengthen society’s control. Ursula Franklin maintains that separation and the ensuing erasure of reciprocity in work relationships “diminishes the sense of common humanity”³⁹, and she goes on to say: “When work isn’t shared, the instruments of cooperation – listening, taking note, adjusting – atrophy like muscles that are no longer in use”⁴⁰. The result is stationing and an acceptance that social isolation for the sake of efficiency is normal and natural.

Social isolation and control is further achieved through the use of technology to monitor employees, a practice that is common within the call centre industry. Because of the potential for technology to monitor, document and evaluate every minute of a call centre employee’s work day, it is necessary to consider how this classic example of

³⁵ Fiske, 1993, pp. 59

³⁶ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 38

³⁷ Eyerman, 2000, pp. 81

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 82

³⁹ Franklin, 1999, pp. 45

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 45

individuation affects the (mostly) women whose autonomy may be decreased in this way.

The worker is almost continuously on the telephone, with automated dialing or call-switching technology providing an unbroken flow of calls. Usually, the number of calls dealt with, their average length and the number of sales are precisely measured, and individual productivity statistics recorded and subject to examination on a daily basis.⁴¹

Buchanan and Koch-Schulte call the potential results of employee monitoring ‘stressful’, however it seems questionable whether this description fully captures the seriousness of the situation. The ability to control the worker’s every word and movement has the potential to impact not only a person’s concept of self, but also their entire relationship to work. In addition, complete control over the body, which is “the primary site of social experience”⁴², must also affect social relations with others. Through the knowledge that every action is known, the person is coerced to discipline themselves and fall in line with the demands of the power structure. This self-discipline is often further encouraged through the ongoing evaluation and judgment of performance⁴³. When an expectation of competition between co-workers is added, through the introduction of sales quotas or the arbitrary definition of what is considered ‘good enough’ or ‘fast enough’, workers may end up even more alienated and isolated from others. Not only might people be put in positions of having to compete with co-workers simply to stay employed, but the customer/service provider relationship may also be affected. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte found that quotas in some call centres were literally impossible to reach, and that the struggle to fulfill these unreasonable demands often put people in unethical positions with customers, while the management absolved itself of any responsibility. “Through the high quotas that were set, employers downloaded the burden of ethical responsibility onto the callers themselves, turning a blind eye to those who performed well by engaging

⁴¹ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 30

⁴² Fiske, 1993, pp. 57

⁴³ It is important to remember that the effects of employees monitoring technologies are in no way uniform, and that the way such monitoring plays out has much to do with the human involvement in individual situations. Electronic evaluation is, after all, still interpreted by humans, and may therefore be communicated in infinitely different ways, both positively and negatively, depending on the person. If, for example, the supervisor had started their career by working on the phones, their evaluation of workers might be positive and empathetic. It is not my goal make sweeping generalizations, but instead to consider possible realities.

in questionable practices”⁴⁴. It is also interesting to note that some call centres actually encourage games and contests (pseudo social interactions) to encourage and enforce competition among workers⁴⁵. Fiske would argue that even this subtler, more ‘generous’ approach is repressive in the sense that it is only allowed insofar as it benefits efficiency and the control of the power-bloc. The worker’s control “is permitted to operate only within limits which it does not set and towards ends which it does choose”⁴⁶.

Within the call centre industry, many women are locked into low paying, insecure and demeaning positions because of inadequate training and devaluation of their skills. This is another example of how women’s positions may be reinforced when there is no opportunity to move outside a particular station. Buchanan and Koch-Schulte found that in many cases, little to no training was offered at call centres, and any training that was provided before and during employment often did not provide the workers with skills that would help them find better jobs. In addition, the skills that are necessary in even the most ‘unskilled’ call centre jobs are ones considered to be ‘natural’ attributes of women generally, and are therefore often not valued. This is a part of the ‘feminization’ of labour that Buchanan and Koch-Schulte describe, whereby “the work of listening, providing empathy and otherwise managing the interpersonal demands of customers while delivering a service” goes unvalued, and does not pave the way for better employment options down the road⁴⁷. The devaluation of these skills further station women in ‘unskilled’, valueless and powerless positions.

The final example I would like to consider is the focus on the ‘flexibility’ of the feminized work force. Both private companies and government are implicated in the creation of more and more ‘hobby jobs’ that act as though they do not exist in order to actually support the worker⁴⁸. This is particularly true of the call centre industry, where we have seen that a large number of workers are employed in non-standard work situations, for example temporary contracts or part-time work (much of which is

⁴⁴ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 25

⁴⁵ Alferoff, 2001.

⁴⁶ Fiske, 1993, pp.71

⁴⁷ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 48

⁴⁸ Klein, 2000, pp. 232

involuntary). In addition, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte found that some call centres actually promote quick employee turnover to keep “productivity rates high”⁴⁹. By only hiring on part-time or temporary bases, and by “using people up”⁵⁰ by making expectations too high, employers benefit by “ensuring that most employees will usually be clustered at the starting end of the pay scale”⁵¹, keeping productivity rates high and evading employee protection laws⁵².

Because of the high number of young people that were found to be working in call centres, Buchanan and Koch-Young emphasize that the ‘flexibility’ of call centre work may result in a damaging first work experience for many youth⁵³. In addition, they point out that “firms that deploy ‘high-turnover’ strategies are undermining the development of precisely those ‘professional’ skills that young workers might be able to take into other jobs”⁵⁴. This touches on an important issue, but fails to raise it fully: young people who begin their working lives by experiencing the kind of demeaning powerlessness that is common in many call centres learn early on that this experience is natural and needs not be questioned⁵⁵. Perhaps this acceptance is best summed up by Naomi Klein: ““So much of the company propaganda is convincing you... that you’re not working class... Everyone thinks they are middle class even when they’re making \$13,000 a year””⁵⁶.

Buchanan and Koch-Schulte emphasize that employment in Canadian call centres often results in stress, insecurity, poverty and powerlessness. Although stress has been shown to be an important workplace health risk⁵⁷, and although Buchanan and Koch-Schulte do try to emphasize the urgency of the situation by using language such as ‘crisis points’⁵⁸, ‘profound lack of control’⁵⁹ and ‘dehumanizing’⁶⁰, the overall emphasis on concepts such

⁴⁹ Buchanan, 2000, pp. 23

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 33

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 11

⁵² Ibid., pp. 33

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 31-32

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 49

⁵⁵ “The individual produced by power is presented as a product of nature.” (Fiske, 1993, pp. 60)

⁵⁶ Klein, 2000, pp. 233

⁵⁷ NIOSH, 1999.

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 32

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 34

as ‘stress’ and ‘burnout’ downplays the seriousness of the situation. If the word ‘stressful’ was replaced with the word ‘inhumane’ every time it appeared, the report would have a very different emotional impact.

It is apparent from these examples that many women employed in ‘feminized’ labour positions, such as those commonly exemplified by Canadian call centres, experience a profound powerlessness in their work lives. This powerlessness, although often discussed only in terms of economics, has serious social and political implications as well, such as the social isolation of individuals, the silencing of voice and the naturalization of control. This silencing of voices based on their stations within society is inherently undemocratic, and the rediscovery of public voice is essential to be able to “‘disrupt some of the common ‘truths’ that shape the world”⁶¹. It is not that our voices have disappeared altogether, rather:

We are reduced to being individuals, and many different methods are used to isolate and manage our acts... Almost every day we make critical observations or interpretations, yet somehow, until we breach the silence and send out an active “no!” we are not able to organise that resistance, or take it seriously.⁶²

It is especially important for women to utter this cry in order to recognize that what our everyday lives are based on remains largely unseen, undiscussed, and most certainly gendered!⁶³ Unless we can begin to recognize and overcome the process of individuation that separates us from the other members of our community of citizens, we may not rediscover our individual and collective voices.

Although the focus of this work has been on the undermining of the voices of women in Canada, the relationship between these Canadian voices and women’s voices in other parts of the world must not be left unaddressed. The very concept of international gender and development risks exemplifying what Dhaliwal describes:

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 56

⁶¹ Sandilands, 1999, pp. 224

⁶² Marino, 1997, pp. 26

⁶³ Sandilands, 1999, pp. 224-225

The ways in which discourses of democracy consolidate “Western State power structures”, promote Western cultural superiority, and serve to justify economic sanctions and purportedly “democratizing” Western military invasions in non-Western contexts, demonstrates how Western countries such as the United States “own” the term or category “democracy” and use it to police or discipline countries not meeting the Western criteria.⁶⁴

I would add that in addition to questioning economic sanctions and military invasions, it is also necessary to challenge Canada’s claim to be able to assist in international ‘development’ when we clearly have critical ‘development’ issues that remain unresolved at home. It is not specifically development initiatives that require criticism, but rather the unproblematized and arrogant claim that countries such as Canada take up the privileged place of having ‘achieved’ democracy, freedom and human rights. What we must keep humbly in mind is that Canada cannot claim perfection over other countries, and that we are constantly at risk for causing more harm than good in our international relations. At this very moment there may be a North American call centre opening up in the Third World, taking advantage of technology and globalization to further increase efficiency and profit at the expense of women’s rights. Although this may be the most likely scenerio, it is by far the least acceptable solution to Canada’s call centre problem.

⁶⁴ Dhaliwal, 1996, pp. 50

References:

- Alferoff, Catrina & David Knights. 2001. *We're all Partying Here: Targets and Games, or Targets as Games in Call Centre Management*. Paper presented at the *Second Critical Management Studies Conference: art and aesthetics in management and organisational studies stream*.
- Bookchin, Murray. 1989. *Remaking Society*. Black Rose Books: Montréal, New York.
- Buchanan, Ruth & Sarah Koch-Schulte. 2000. *Gender on the Line: Technology, Restructuring and the Reorganization of Work in the Call Centre Industry*. Status of Women Canada's Policy Research Fund.
- Burke, Mike & John Shields. 1999. *The Job-Poor Recovery: Social Cohesion and the Canadian Labour Market. A Research Report of the Ryerson Social Reporting Network* (Senior Researchers, *Ryerson Social Reporting Network*). Ryerson Polytechnic University: Toronto.
- Dhaliwal, L.K. 1996. *Can the Subaltern Vote? Radical Democracy, Discourses of Representation and Rights, and Questions of Race in Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State* (Trend, David, ed.)
- Eyerman, Ann. 2000. *Women in the Office: Transitions in a Global Economy*. Sumach Press: Toronto.
- Fiske, John. 1993. *Power Plays Power Works*. Verso: London, New York.
- Franklin, Ursula. 1990, 1999. *The Real World of Technology*. Anansi: Toronto.
- Klein, Naomi. 2000. *No logo: taking aim at the brand bullies*. Vintage Canada: Toronto.
- marino, dian. 1997. *Wild Garden: art, education and the culture of resistance*. Between the Lines: Toronto.
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). 1999. *Stress... at Work*. DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 99-101. <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html>
- Roger, Simon. 1982. *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction*. Lawrence & Wishart: London.
- Status of Women Canada. 1995. *Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality*.