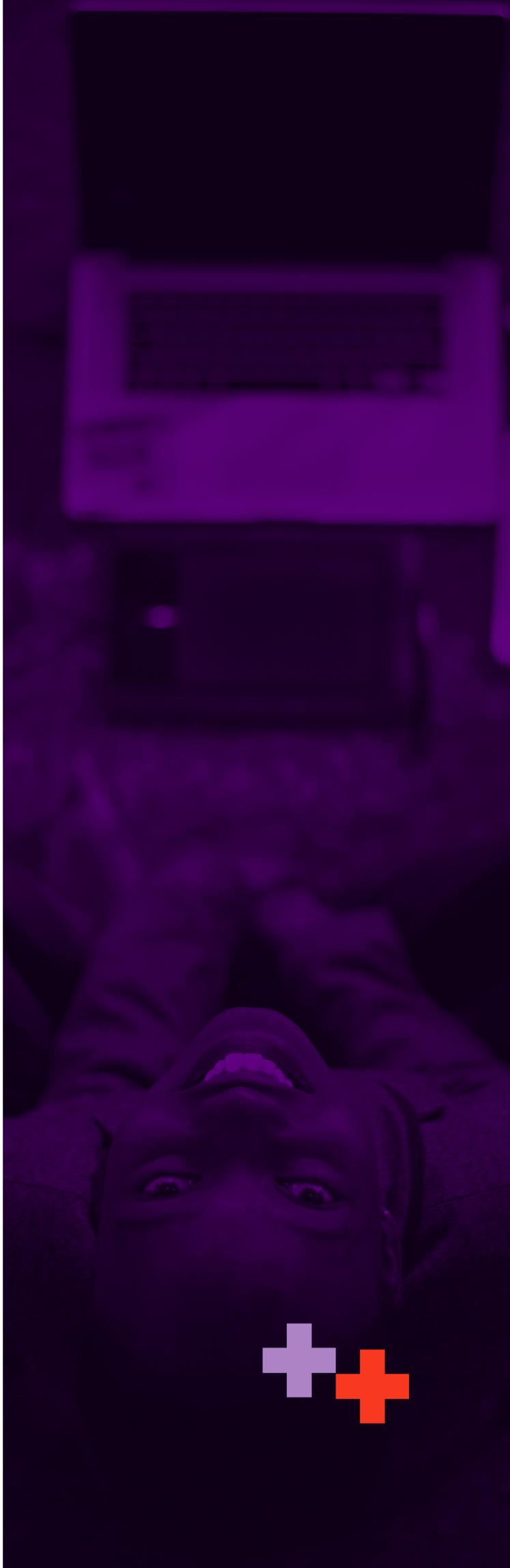


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SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND YOUNG WOMEN'S WORK IN THE CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The call centre industry continues to grow as a major business outsourcing avenue. National and international organisations are increasingly using call centres for marketing as well as for outsourcing customer services, often based in developing countries. The South African government supports such business outsourcing through prioritising call centres for investments and as job creation for its young people. A quarterly labour force survey (QLFS), released by Statistics South Africa in the last quarter of 2017, shows a national unemployment rate of 26.7%, with a high youth unemployment rate of 29.7% among 15- to 24-year olds. Such high youth unemployment rates make call centres especially attractive in South Africa. Empirical findings from this sector show that 75% of the employees in South African call centres are young women who have just finished school and female college students. An exploration of skills development in the call centre industry is therefore also an exploration of skills development for young women, who are the majority of workers. This chapter presents findings from qualitative focus group discussions and individual interviews conducted with young women who work as agents in call centres in Cape Town and Johannesburg. We conducted four focus group discussions of six to eight participants and 20 semi-structured individual interviews, with women aged 19–34 years working as agents in various call centres. All interview participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Focus groups and interview data was analysed through a qualitative thematic analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Training for key competencies** varied from organisation to organisation, from a few days to several weeks. Training took different forms: brief teaching sessions followed by tests; memorising scripts to answer possible questions; basic keyboard skills, including word processing and speed typing; communication skills of pronunciation, phone etiquette, and voice demeanour.
- **Some participants indicated** that training consisted of hands-on experience on the shop floor, with minimal prior training. This included informal side-by-side coaching, or “buddying up” to understudy their fellow workers.
- **Agents might be put under pressure** designed to test their level of resistance.
- **Much emphasis was put on the development of “people skills”;** respondents considered call centres highly focused on developing people skills, more than any technical or digital skills, no matter what technological systems were adopted in training. They questioned call centres’ capability to promote technical skills development.
- **Skills developed in call centres** were specific to work in call centres rather than transferable to other work.
- **Few leadership positions were available,** and there was a lack of personal growth.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous business organisations have begun to use call-centres in developing countries, through both onshoring and outsourcing services, taking advantage of their cheap labour and favourable labour attrition rates. Call centres operate on information communication technology (ICT) platforms that enable easy global access. Key destinations for global outsourcing call centres are India, the Philippines, and, of late, South Africa and Kenya. The South African Government prioritises call centres for investments and job creation (Banks & Roodt, 2011). As such, the industry has grown tremendously over the years, becoming a key source of employment for young people. A quarterly labour force survey (QLFS), released by Statistics South Africa in the last quarter of 2017, shows a national unemployment rate of 26.7%, and 29.7% for youth aged 15–24. Given high youth unemployment levels, it is not surprising that the government supports call centres to address the issue.

This chapter draws on a project that explored young women’s work in call centres in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg in South Africa. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with young women who work in call centres, to explore the dynamics of skills development in this largely digitalised industry. The chapter evaluates the skills development of the young women workers, considering the link between the training and skills acquired on the job and advancement prospects for workers, in view of evolving information and communication technological systems. It begins by looking at the nature of call centre work in South Africa, followed by an exploration of women’s work in call centres. The chapter then presents the voices of young women, capturing the experience of skills development of these young workers.

LOCATING SOUTH AFRICAN CALL CENTRES IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

The call centre industry in South Africa has grown immensely since the '80s, becoming a thriving domestic industry and a key employer of young people who would otherwise be unemployed. Banks and Roodt (2011) describe the industry as growing largely through business-owned centres, which incorporate call centres as part of their own business processes. They emphasise that call centres have "moved from occupying a relatively small niche to being a significant part of the global economy" (Banks & Roodt, 2011, p. 3). South African call centres are an integral part of the global market system based on neoliberal capitalism.

Neoliberalisation favors opening up international markets through easing trade and labour regulations. Firms can benefit from access to external labour and capital markets for outsourcing services, capitalising on cheap labour as well as on flexible ways to build capital. Raewyn Connell sees neoliberalism as "the agenda of economic and social transformation" which dominates "global politics" and is systematically implemented in "institutions under neoliberal control" (Connell, 2014, pp. 5-6). The globalised economy entails outsourcing ancillary services, such as tele-marketing and service provision, to emerging markets (Panday & Rogerson, 2014). Of concern to feminist scholars is that these outsourced services mostly depend on women's cheap labour.

In South Africa, call centres emerged in the late '80s, growing rapidly in the '90s due to improved technology and lower communication costs (Benner, 2006; Holman; Batt & Holtgrewe, 2007; Panday & Rogerson, 2014). The industry has grown steadily since then and now serves both local and international markets. Research shows that more than two-thirds of call centre employees in South Africa are young people under age 35 (Cohen, 2013; Panday & Rogerson, 2014); approximately 75% of these young people are women (Benner, Lewis, & Omar, 2007). This employment pattern is also a common global trend (Belt, 2002; Bonds, 2006; Darsun & Bayram, 2014). Any investigation into call centre work is also an investigation into women's work, the concern of this chapter.

UNDERSTANDING THE CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

The South African government policy prioritising the call centre industry is focused on attracting international investors, a strategy that is emphasised in the recent Business Process Enabling South Africa (BPESA) Key Indicator Report (2016). The government Minister of Trade and Industry, Rob Davies, notes that South Africa was named the offshoring destination of the year at the Global Sourcing Association (GSA) awards in London in 2016, an award the country had also received in 2014 and 2012 (BPESA, 2016). Figure 8.1, from the BPESA report, illustrates some of South Africa's key strengths as a potential business outsourcing destination.

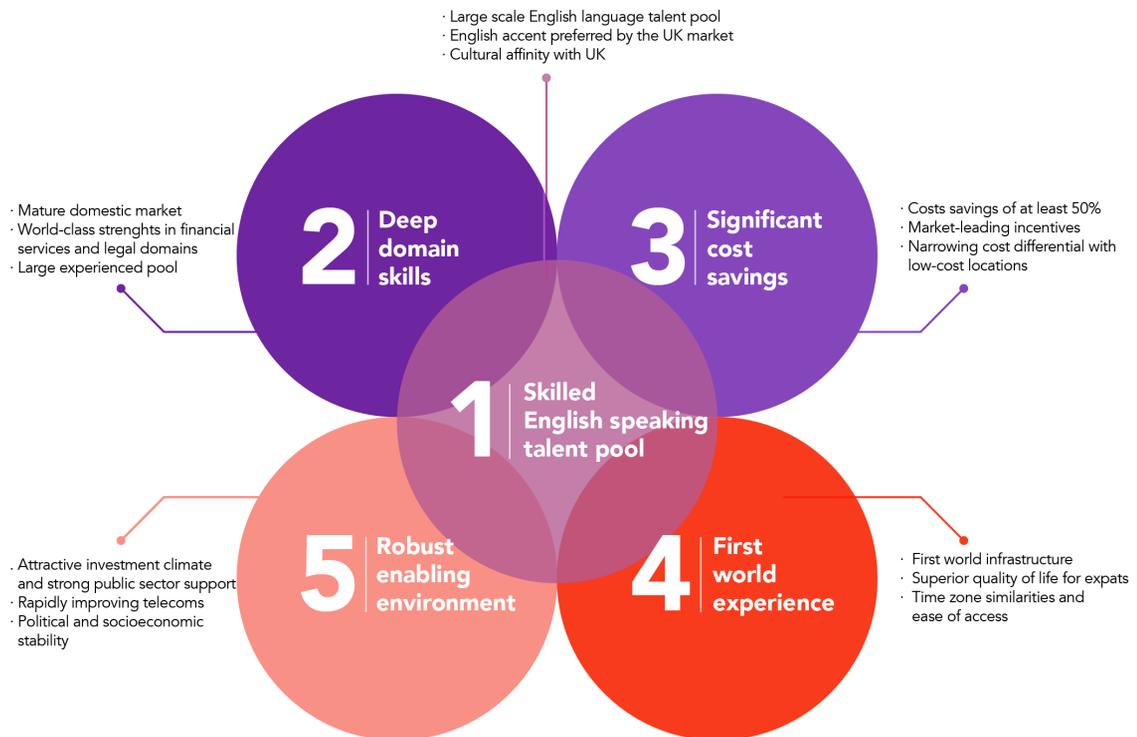
This strategic positioning of South Africa is widely documented (DTI, 2013; Hall, 2011). In line with neoliberal free market approaches, and to reduce unemployment, the South African Government is focused on strategies to develop a "sustainable skills" pool for its growing Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) market (BPESA, 2016). Key strategies considered include the following (adapted from BPESA, 2016, p.9):

- extending BPO skills through development of industry-specific academies
- facilitating participation of government educational institutions in the BPO agenda
- addressing critical skills gaps
- building competence of team leaders and managers
- developing English and foreign language skills
- harnessing technology for skills development

It is still unclear how the South African government will translate this commitment into action, and what advantages and disadvantages it will entail for women working in this sector.

Figure 8.1
South Africa – strengths in business outsourcing

South Africa as a BPO destination



Source: BPESA, 2016, p. 6.

WOMEN'S WORK IN CALL CENTRES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS

South Africa serves as an ideal destination for BPO, particularly in the service sector. The growth of the service sector has seen a huge pool of women entering the global labour market (Gillard, Howcroft, Mitev, & Richardson, 2007; Eisenstein, 2009; Darsun & Bayram, 2014; Howcroft & Richardson, 2008), and the call centre industry is largely dependent on women's labour for both offshore and onshore services (Bonds, 2006). This global practice highlights the importance on women's labour as significant for global markets and international competition (Moghadom, 2000).

Scholars have viewed women's predominance in the call centre labour force in widely differing ways. On the positive side, some see the growth of the service sector resulting in substantial increases in the number of women in the labour force, especially in emerging markets. Labour force participation is seen as affording women economic independence, providing a basis for resisting patriarchy (Diane Wolf, cited in Eisenstein, 2009, p. 149); some endorse call centre jobs as decent work (Cohen,

2013). Other scholars argue that call centre work is service labour and thus likely to perpetuate the feminisation of labour (Standing, 1999; Howcroft & Robinson, 2008; Blin, 2010). Some scholars go further, accusing the governments of developing countries of being complicit in "offering up" their workforce as capable and affordable to a capitalist world largely driven by neoliberal market competition (Lacity & Wilcocks, 2013). Service provision jobs are criticised for centralising gendered notions of femininity, to justify women's participation in the labour force. These stereotypes are seen as contributing to the "devaluing" and "deskilling" of women's work, while promoting occupational segregation and polarisation (Bonds, 2006, p. 32). Such occupational segregation reinforces inequality in the labour force, since women in the call centres occupy the lower end of the employment spectrum.

The fact that women are the majority of workers in call centres also has clear economic implications: profit margins remain protected, or even increase, due to the devaluation of women's labour, which is always coupled with a reduction in labour costs (Gillard, et al. 2007). Furthermore, evidence shows that digital environments, such as that of the call centre industry, have the potential to "erode labour protection standards" (Gillwald, Mothobi & Schoentgen, 2017,

p. 2), especially because high levels of unionisation would deter investment. Eased labour protection standards can render women workers vulnerable to exploitation.

Figure 8.2 presents key skills-development approaches for managers in call centres in South Africa, as shown in the 2016 BPESA report. It shows that South African call centres pay significant attention to skills development, taking particular interest in upskilling staff.

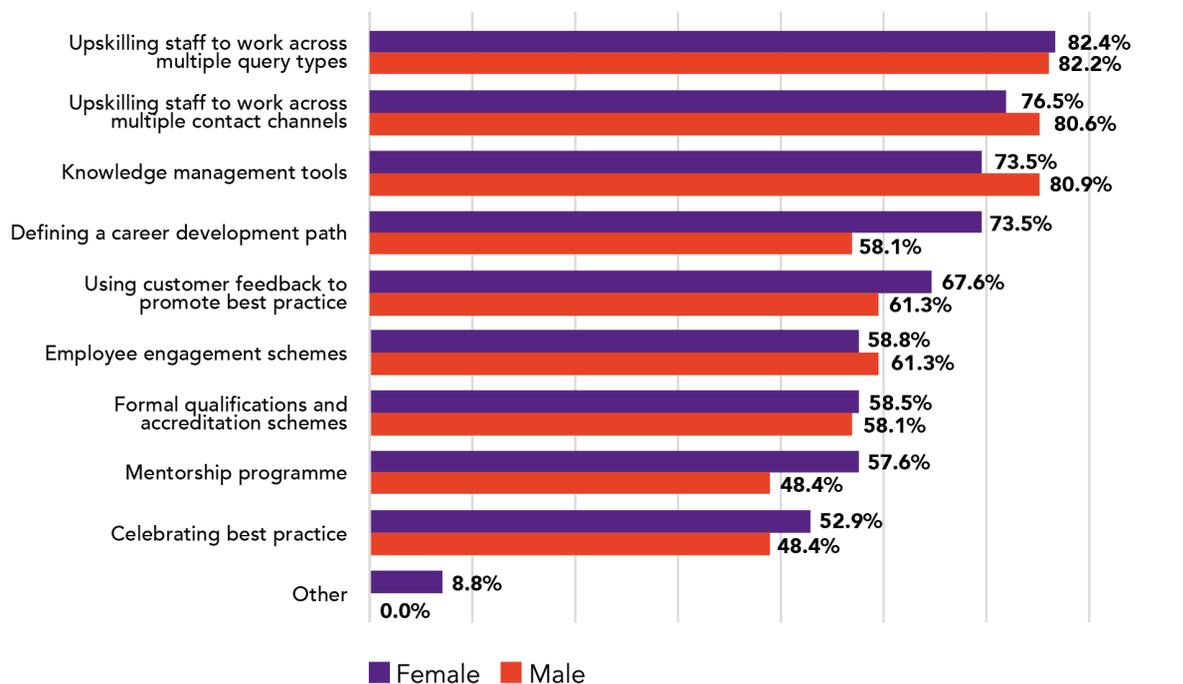
SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY

Scholarship on skills development in call centres is very limited. Evidence from sites that advertise call centre work shows that the industry does not routinely seek applicants with prior call centre skills, but rather offer their own training (see www.jobin.co.za). Recruitment efforts target marginalised, less-skilled young people, particularly women, who are either school leavers or college students (Benner, Lewis, & Omar, 2007). Call centres are highly routinised; the work requires little skills variety (Coetzee & Harry, 2015), and worker development is precluded by the flat organisational structure (Choi, S., Cheong & Feinberg, 2012). This research explores the implications of skills development for young women workers in South Africa, building on the body of scholarship on women’s work in call centres in the Global South, particularly in the African context.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on a research project that investigated the participation of young women in the call centre industry in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg in South Africa, using surveys, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. Surveys noted demographic information on the participants as well as socio-economic and work-related factors. This paper draws particularly on the focus group discussions and individual interviews, to explore the impact of the call centre industry on skills development among these young women. Four focus group discussions of six to eight participants, as well as 20 semi-structured individual interviews, were conducted with young women aged 19–34 who currently worked as agents in different call centres. Participants included college students, school leavers, and other women. All interview participants were sampled through convenience and snowball sampling, and interview sessions took place in various settings where the participants would feel comfortable: at

Figure 8.2
Skills development in call centres in South Africa



Source: BPESA, 2016, p. 28.

their work place during breaks; at their homes or colleagues' homes; and at their colleges. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed that they could leave the study at any time without penalty. Focus group and interview data was analysed through a qualitative thematic analysis.

FINDINGS

The young women interviewed in this study included both part-time and full-time workers at call centres, which served British, American, and South African companies focusing on finance, telecoms, retail, data collection, and gaming. The interview questions concentrated on their experiences as workers, with particular reference to skills development. This section presents participants' perspectives and insights on skills acquisition for both job competency and career development.

SKILLS TRAINING FOR JOB COMPETENCY

Participants indicated that training took different forms that varied by organisation, with the initial training ranging from a few weeks to several months.

You get theory for like maybe 2 weeks, and then you are on the floor for another week.

The training was 3 months, and... you would need communication, interpersonal skills, be computer literate, patience, and I mean a lot of it, and then good listening skills.

You just get basic training on how to do the job: how to answer the phone, how to understand accents, how to operate their system and all that stuff. Their training is actually self-training, so you read stuff off the pc, then when you are done with that, they test you based on that and if you fail, they terminate your contract based on that.

There is a script that they give you that you memorise.

The training included teaching sessions followed by tests, that determined either progression to the floor or termination of contract. Agents also memorised scripts to master the questions they would have to answer on the shop floor. They were trained in basic keyboard skills, which included word processing and speed typing. They received training in communication skills: how to pronounce certain words, phone etiquette, and voice demeanour. Most of these skills have been labelled "effeminate" (Bonds, 2006) — and, scholars note, they are critical to these and similar industries that capitalise on women's biological and social characteristics to drive profits.

One participant touched on the issue of gendered recruitment when she emphasised how prospective employers considered it necessary to listen to her voice as part of training:

... so that my potential employers could hear the sound of my voice, whether my speech is slurred or... This is because call centres often want a voice that is pleasing and softer in terms of sound. Men are often linked to having voices that are rough and edgy, so maybe most men who apply do not get the job because of the sound of their voice, but I cannot be sure.

A number of participants felt that initial training sessions did not assist much in equipping them for their work, and that the most useful training occurred when they got to the shop floor.

INFORMAL TRAINING: 'WE LEARN ON THE FLOOR'

Some participants indicated that key readiness for tasks was developed only through hands-on experience on the shop floor. They spoke about side-by-side coaching, which they termed "buddying up", where they were assigned to understudy fellow workers or to be assisted by more experienced colleagues.

The first three days, you buddy up with someone else, you listen to their calls, you are with them as they take calls, you get to listen to the type of queries the clients raise, and you note how they are able to answer and then after that you go on your own.

You also have someone else buddying up with you. ... It's the older people that come and listen in so if you're struggling and you need to ask something you can quickly ask to put the client on mute and in the meantime, you quickly find out the information that you require and then give it to the client. Then after that buddying up you're on your own.

They found this mode of training interesting and quite effective. Shop floor skills development was informal, however, and such informal processes do not secure skills recognition for career development, since they are not documented.

Training also involved putting agents under pressure to test their level of resistance, as one agent explained:

They suss up who can deal with high pressure situations and who can't — a lot of trainees leave at this point and do not return.

High pressure training was also linked to training towards achieving set targets that measure the worker's competency for the job.

The women workers admitted that all these forms of training and exposure provided them with some new skills. This chapter examines the nature of the skills acquired on the job and their value for career development.

THERE IS COMPANY GROWTH AND NO PERSONAL GROWTH: SKILLS TRAINING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

While some participants felt that the initial training improved their skills in some ways, others dismissed it as routine training that did not add to their skills. Respondents put emphasis on acquiring what are often called “people skills” (White & Roos, 2005), and agents believed they “picked up” these skills on the job.

I wouldn't say training empowered me with any skills but the work environment did. Having to deal with people, having to solve peoples' problems and having to think on your feet. It is the experience and not necessarily the training that matters. Training is just theory, information on the product the company offers and that is all. In most cases you forget those things, it's doing the work and you being active that gives you the training and experience that you take with you out of the call centre business, to other companies or to other aspects of your life where you will implement them.

I learnt to listen more attentively and work within very demanding circumstances. This job has also taught me to be very patient with the customers and use the different communication skills to connect with the customers.

So, what I am saying is that it's is not all bad, there is positivity in it. It will give you the opportunity and equip you for the future job that you want to do, it will give you soft skills, leadership skills, how to approach other situations as well.

Agents felt that call centre jobs developed soft skills and people skills more than technical or digital skills. While they appreciated developing people skills for personal growth, some questioned the importance of these skills for career growth.

Call centres are great, you meet people, acquire people skills, improve your communication skills, you improve yourself, you get promoted if you are lucky, to do the same thing anywhere —but the sad thing is that there is nowhere else you can fit with those skills. You have to work call centres or look for a job as a receptionist somewhere else! You can't take those skills anywhere.

The only skill you take across is moving to another call centre to do the same thing, agent or team leader.

I have only learnt to withstand pressure and to be confident and nothing else.

Agents also described the challenges of getting promoted, due to the limited availability of leadership positions as well as the intense competition for the limited positions of growth.

You find people “playing game of thrones” [back stabbing each other] to climb ladders that do not exist — there is company growth and no personal growth there.

I have been working here for four years now, and there are very limited positions to grow within the workplace. For years I have been doing the same thing on a daily basis, but there have been no promotions.

The ceiling is low, you rise and get stuck there, who wants to be a 50-year-old answering phones? Call centres kill your mind.

I see this job as limiting, people working in call centres always work at call centres, and they tend to not change jobs. One of my colleagues has been working with this company for six years, doing the same stuff every day and is still in the same position.

Call centres do not promote growth or any type of growth in terms of career prospects. The job is repetitive because every day I do the same thing and this can be quite frustrating if you want to express your talents and creativity.

Participants repeatedly discussed the lack of career growth, with some characterising the nature of call centre work as exploitative. In this view, they saw some centres capitalising on workers' vulnerability, arising from a lack of alternative employment.

I would say that call centres are exploitative. They use the basic work loss that we have here in South Africa. . . . It's cheaper over here to employ people than it is overseas . . . and someone did mention that you are easily replaceable in a call centre.

You are told straight out if you are not happy, it's fine, leave, there is someone that wants that job that you don't want. You are easily replaceable, you are not important. You are just a number in a lot of numbers they can easily get rid of.

Although not a common observation, one participant also raised what she saw as the gendered nature of promotion in her organisation.

I have learned a lot of skills such as communication skills, persuasiveness, conflict management, computer skills, and skills on sales. . . . But the thing is, even though I have learned all these skills at this job, I am still in the same position I started off with. I have never been promoted. They mostly promote guys. When we ask why it's only guys that get promoted, they say

it's because they perform and that's why they earn it. Surely there must be at least one girl who performs in this job.

DISCUSSION

Call centres largely provide service through use of digital technologies. Firms engaged in outsourcing have absorbed large numbers of young people, especially women, into various occupations (Belt, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 2005; Singh & Pandey, 2005). Call centres are not gender-neutral, as the industry is significantly driven by women's labour (Russell, 2008). The feedback of workers in the surveys and interviews cited above indicates that call centres do not focus on developing skills that lead to career development. The skills acquired by working in the industry do not add significant value to women's advancement in the labour market, keeping them on the lower rungs of the employment ladder (Ngabaza, 2017; Webster, 2004). Similarly, this study shows that the minimal skills developed in call centres are not intended to empower the women employees but rather to maintain profit margins. The absence of unions represents a business policy, as high levels of unionisation might drive away possible investors (Benner et al., 2007) — further compromising labour protection standards (Gillard, et al., 2007; Gillwald, et al., 2017).

Examining the intersection of skills development with the gendered dynamics of employment can provide a more complete understanding of the implications of skills development for women call centre workers. Research shows that ICT-driven work can reach marginalised and vulnerable communities (World Bank, 2016); indeed, call centres in South Africa mainly employ young women from such communities. Since ICTs are not gender-neutral but are “embedded in a range of social economic and political contexts” (Bonds, 2006, p. 31), it is important to interrogate the gender dynamics to understand what the skills development process implies for workers.

The recruitment process focuses on “feminine” skills: basic keyboard skills, phone etiquette, word processing, and voice demeanour. Workplace skills development focuses on effective service provision, not career growth. Workers develop their skills informally, coached by colleagues or memorising scripts. Scholars note, in similar contexts, that such informally obtained skills are not recognised as skills or considered in promotion prospects (Webster, 2004). While some participants valued the interpersonal skills they had acquired, they felt that these were of limited value to their career progression, and that they had not gained technical skills that could lead to further employment in the information sector.

The key competencies developed in the “skilling” of call centre agents have been linked to essentialist feminine skills. Young women in call centres remain the core drivers of this digital industry, in a global context that promotes economic growth without career development. Some study participants indicated that the focus of call centres was on organisational and economic growth, at the expense of skills development that might enhance their personal and career growth; some said they were reduced to a “lot of numbers” and were easily replaceable. Such contexts perpetuate gender inequality (Scholarios & Taylor, 2010).

While call centres have been instrumental in job creation in South Africa, where unemployment is a major issue, gender inequalities cannot be overlooked in assessing projects promoting economic growth and job creation opportunities. Moghadam (2000) has shown how global neoliberal trade regimes and competition have capitalised on women's labour. More than a decade later, the same process is replicated in call centres, which embody the “feminisation of production in the new information economy” (Bonds, 2006, p. 32). Young women are marginalised for corporate profits in this digitally-anchored industry; their labour is a source of global economic growth, as companies compete for the best outsourcing destinations in new emerging markets. Many of the young women participants were aware of this exploitation, emphasising that call centre work was “part-time work” while focusing on building other skills for their careers. However, they were also aware of the strain of juggling call centre work and other areas of personal development, especially for those who were still studying. In spite of being based in information technologies, call centres remain limited in equipping their workers — especially the young women who represent the majority — with valuable skills for career growth.

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