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The value of transgender women in the Philippine call centre industry

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While call centres provide an otherwise unavailable path to corporate work for trans individuals, they also extract value while conferring social status

The Philippines is the undisputed global call centre capital. According to [one report](#), over a million Filipinos are hired in call centres and that figure is forecast to reach 1.8 million by 2022.

What is also increasingly known is the concentration of transgender women in the industry. According to **Emmanuel David**, Associate Professor of women and gender studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, one interviewee in his [research](#) in the Philippines estimated that three in four employees at her call centre were transgender women.

“75 percent of the people working in one call centre were transgender women,” David explained at a recent SMU School of Social Sciences (SOSS) seminar titled “*Toward a Sociological Theory of Trans Value: Emergent Patterns of Inclusion in a Globalized Workplace*”.

While noting that call centres provided an alternative to employment that is often associated with transgender individuals, such as entertainment or sex work, David wrote that transgender women are “clustered, dispersed, and segregated in the workplace...to serve a particular value-producing function”.

“At first glance it might seem that management was concerned that the trans women would be less productive if they were together,” David explains, referring to the practice of placing trans women on separate teams at call centres. “But as I continued interviewing, I started seeing that this was about the other employees and making their colleagues more productive by having trans women on the team.

“I found that trans women were expected to be social lubricants to ease the anxiety in the workplace, to make it fun or in some ways to be comical and reduce the stress of dealing with unpleasant and sometimes racist customers. So I began to start to see a pattern of this dispersal of these trans employees as being tied to their workplace role, which often required unpaid value producing emotional labour.”

CREATING AND EXTRACTING TRANS VALUE

Expanding on the idea of [trans value](#), David articulates that such arrangements “appear to be another way that companies are managing diversity in order to maximise the value that they could extract from these new sources of labour in the work place”.

Some trans women embrace their role in creating a certain social dynamic, and sometimes creating professional value in the process. David cites the example of Angel, a pre-operative trans woman who earns 30,000 pesos (approximately US\$590) as a call centre supervisor. He relates examples from her interview:

“She would make herself the butt of a joke in order to elicit laughter or smiles. She would go up behind a colleague while they're at their workstation with their headset, and she'd say in a deep masculine voice, ‘Hey pare’, which is a Filipino term for ‘Hey dude’ or ‘Hey bro’.

“But she would deepen her voice when she did it and they would all laugh. I asked why she did this and she said, ‘Well, looking like a girl, they're expecting my voice to be feminine. Then I see them smile because it's weird for them to see a shemale – her words, not mine – with a deep voice.

“I wanted to think about how this was a form of disparagement and humiliation that they subjected themselves to, but they also saw it as trying to increase their social stature in the setting by being humorous and doing this work. So there's kind of a contradiction here in the performance of value.”

The creation of unpaid value often extends beyond the confines of the office space or call centre in the form of so-called team-building activities. In the case of one outsourcing company, a beauty pageant featuring trans women employees became what David calls “value extraction seeping into the employees’ lives off the clock”.

“There was this trans pageant last year that featured over two-dozen trans employees, three of whom were flown in from a neighbouring island just to participate, and this event was free and open to the public so that's how I was able to go,” he recounts. “It became a public event that was broadcast outward, and the audience was comprised almost entirely of employees and family members of employees.

“I turned to the person sitting next to me and...she showed me this glossy card that she was holding. They could earn stickers for a number of things, like 100 percent weekly attendance or participation in a company-wide engagement activity such as this one. They can redeem them a few months later at an employee fair for special prizes.”

But when the costs of participation and dressing up for the occasion are factored in, one wonders if employees actually gain anything at all. David explains:

“I learnt that each of the transgender contestants came from a particular account, the contestants’ teammates were in the audience and they sat in groups and they wore matching clothing. I learnt that they had spent weeks preparing, leading up to the event, attending rehearsals through choreography. It turned out they had to take vacation leave so that they could participate.

“They also were given a budget of about US\$70 for their outfits or they make them themselves but they ended up sharing it with the pageant organisers for their assistance in this kind of informal economies surrounding these events. So, not only were they off the clock, they were using up their employee benefits, unpaid labour and all of this to kind of smooth the operations of the company to make it fun and enjoyable.

“This was meant to be seen outward as a way of promoting the company.”

A TOUCH OF CLASS

It is not surprising that companies are projecting an image of being trans-friendly. From Pantene’s [#StrongerNow campaign](#) to Cebu Pacific’s recent hiring of its first two trans women as flight attendants, David argues that “capitalism is made friendly to trans people and...trans people are becoming more palatable for these global corporations; there's a synergy starting to occur there”.

Despite criticisms of trans tokenism that casts companies in a cynical light for advertising an appreciation for LGBTQ issues, call centres remain an otherwise unavailable path into the corporate world with attractive pay. David’s research pegs an average call centre worker’s pay at 20,000 pesos or US\$465 monthly, which is more than what teachers get.

But beyond pure financial rewards, gaining access to the headsets at a call centre is a marker of social status. “You have to speak a particular type of English to be allowed to speak into the microphones,” observes **Yasmin Ortiga**, SMU Assistant Professor of Sociology and chair of the seminar, noting that those from lower social-economic backgrounds are unlikely to speak with American, British, or Australian accents that would be acceptable.

David adds: "Some of them would say, 'I work for an international bank' even though it's in a call centre. Class aspiration is definitely part of this. An interesting project would be looking at those who aspire to do this work but never got past the first cut because they didn't have the right education or class background.

"Those who make it into the call centres, because of their English language skills, have already crossed a threshold in terms of class status."

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