

2018 - "Precarity, Gender Capital, and Structures of (Dis) Empowerment in the Neoliberal Service Economy", in Megha Amrith and Nina Sahraoui (eds), *Gender, Work and Migration: Agency in Gendered Labour Settings*. London: Routledge.

# Precarity, gender capital and structures of (dis)empowerment in the neoliberal service economy

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## Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, an advertisement circulating widely on Portuguese television channels captured the attention of public opinion. The ad showed a young woman named Marta, carefully dressed in light colours, with a neat hairstyle and joyful manners. We could see Marta, a call centre operator working for an insurance company, smiling while answering the phone and saying, 'Hello, my name is Marta, how may I help you?' A couple of years later, the same company launched another ad, in which 'another Marta' informed clients about the company's latest innovative shifts in insurance services provision, while emphasising that 'what hasn't changed is our availability'. The first and the second Martas were the embodiment of ready-made availability, a constant and stable culturally coded feminine characteristic. Call centre work was portrayed as a female-friendly kind of work, where women carried out their tasks with a permanent smile doing what they do best: serving and caring.<sup>1</sup> Marta's image towards the end of the twentieth century embodied long-lasting gendered dispositions associated with service work. Marta's servitude resonated with the deference of 'sales girls' in 1950s retail shops in the United States, captured by C. Wright Mills (2002: 182) to illustrate the emergence and expansion of the 'personality market', a realm in which the 'personal or even intimate traits of the employee are drawn into the sphere of exchange'. Marta's caring smile signalled women's naturalised ability to handle people and act upon their emotions and state of mind – as examined by Arlie Hochschild (1983) in her study of 'emotional labour' among Delta's flight attendants.

At the same time as Marta's presence on Portuguese national television became an aspect of daily life, call centre work was elevated to the main symbol of *precarity* in the media, public opinion and politics. Following global trends associated with neoliberal employment restructuring of the European economy, call centre work emerged in the media as the main symbol of employment casualisation, lack of career prospects, low wages, reduced social benefits and citizenship destitution. The media, social movements against casualisation, left-wing parties and trade unions increasingly started to depict call centre work as a defining feature of the young workers who comprise the '500 euros generation' (*geração dos 500 euros*): overqualified and stuck in low-wage employment. Against this, the sector has been hailed by the government and employers' associations as an 'important source of employment' for youngsters entering the labour market.

The '500 euros generation' was a publicly sanctioned label for the most educated generation since the 1974 Carnation revolution to represent unfulfilled projects of social mobility and middle-class status. The generation currently working in call centres internalised, throughout the course of their lives, the social hopes instilled by their working-class parents and the state. The former projected onto their children expectations of stable employment and middle-class distinction, while the latter promoted higher education massification as a way of

realising the dreams of national modernity after adhesion to the European Union (EU) in 1986. In the context of increasing policies of labour deregulation and the growing devaluation of higher education degrees, call centre workers' livelihood conditions mirror the enduring reproductive and status crisis afflicting a significant parcel of the Portuguese labour force, further intensified in the wake of harsh austerity measures.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of the parents of my informants migrated to Lisbon, particularly during the 1970s, looking for better jobs and living conditions for them and their children. Although with some variations, the parental generation was able to mobilise internal migration as a route towards upward social mobility. Their trajectories of movement from the hinterland towards the city enabled them to escape the prospects of livelihoods of material deprivation and economic hardship. Migratory movement enabled dislocations in social status, work opportunities, material livelihood conditions, access to middle-class goods, and the ability to invest in their children's education and future life prospects. Precarious call centre workers have a very distinct relation to migration and the possibilities it entails. Call centre workers have few prospects of moving within the country due to the prominent lack of public investment in rural contexts, an increasing lack of job posts in other coastal cities and greater labour market competition. At the same time, they tend to be very cautious concerning migration abroad. They are aware that present receiving countries of Portuguese emigration are not the same as those of their parental generation: emigration during the dictatorship (1926–74) was mostly directed to France and Germany to fulfil the lack of low-skilled labour power in domestic services and factory work. Today, the younger generation migrates mostly to northern European countries (such as the UK), where they face competition from highly qualified migratory contingents from other southern European countries, as well as the native populations. Most of my informants were very much aware of this trend, while also implicitly remarking that if they were to decide to migrate abroad, they would continue to be a burden for their parents as they are now – that is, they would be migrating on credit. Instead of sending remittances back, they would need their parents' money and support to maintain themselves in countries such as the UK. These circumstances attached to migration tend to generate feelings of being trapped – 'stuck in call centre work'. These feelings intensified under the austerity measures conditional to the structural adjustment programme (2011–14). Emigration during this period achieved levels paralleling those of the dictatorship period,<sup>3</sup> including young and highly qualified labour power. The youngsters who migrated were those whose parents' economic and social capital was sufficiently strong to allow their offspring to migrate. Thus call centre workers' sense of entrapment and immobility is accentuated along the lines of generation and class. This is manifest when they compare themselves with their parents or realise that, within their own age cohort, they are the ones staying behind.

The increasing precarisation of labour relations and employment conditions shows significant shifts, as well as continuities, in workers' strategies for coping with livelihood disruptions, shattered middle-class aspirations and devalued labour regimes. This chapter will reflect on the facilitating conditions, causes and effects of such coping strategies within the context of the call centre labour regime, with an emphasis on the uses made of *gender capital* by the male work-force. I draw on ethnographic research carried out between August 2007 and January 2009 in a call centre belonging to a private telecommunications company (to be anonymised as 'EVA') in Portugal, as well as media archival research and semi-biographical interviews with operators, team leaders and coordinators. At EVA, I was able to follow and shadow the everyday work of operators and team leaders in commercial and technical helplines, and attend team meetings, as well as recruitment and training sessions. In addition, I followed operators' livelihood routes outside the workplace, joining them in several formal and informal gatherings. Since 2012, while continuing ethnographic research in Portugal, I have maintained regular contact with call centre operators, and have followed management developments in

the sector and in union dynamics.

Pierre Bourdieu (1979/2010: 102), despite having written that ‘sexual properties are as inseparable from class properties as the yellowness of a lemon is from its acidity’, never fully developed gender as a form of cultural capital. Such development has been, implicitly or explicitly, proposed by feminists such as McCall (1992), Skeggs (1997, 2004), Lovell (2000) and Huppertz (2012). Although I do not prescribe to any conclusive definition of ‘gender capital’, the broader conceptualisation underlying analysis in this chapter combines insights from Bourdieu and feminist critical theory. I understand gender capital as an autonomous form of capital vis-à-vis cultural capital, existing in the same forms as the latter: embodied, objectified and institutionalised.

- Gender capital in the *embodied* form refers to historically contingent and context-dependent *gendered habituses*, constituted by a set of bodily and perceptive dispositions typecast as masculine or feminine and internalised through one’s trajectory (for example ways of acting on the body, ways of moving in the public and private space, ways of speaking).
- In its *objectified* form, gender capital often takes the form of material and immaterial objects that are endowed with gendered properties in everyday practice (for example dolls for girls and cars for boys; activity as male and passivity as feminine).

Lastly, in its *institutionalised* form, gender capital achieves perhaps its best materialisation in the labour process – as in the case of the call centre labour regime described in this chapter – in which production tasks, valorisation devices and labour outputs are embedded in relational and asymmetrical conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

In this chapter, I emphasise the ways in which gender capital is relationally defined within historically constituted social fields that ascribe a differential value to femininity and masculinity. Gender capital is legitimated by structures of power, privilege and hierarchy, shaping the ways in which it is mobilised as either an empowering or disempowering status strategy.

Gender, class and coping/empowering strategies are not unexamined themes in the call centre literature. Scholars have addressed the feminisation of call centre work tasks, linking it to historical patterns of capitalist expansion (for example Ng and Mitter 2005), thus drawing genealogical links with the past valuation of women’s ‘nimble and dexterous fingers’ (Elson and Pearson 1981). The joint feminisation and *ghettoisation* of call centre work and employment conditions has illuminated the resilience of patterns of gender-based job segregation (for example Belt 2002). Research on the transnational call centre sector has provided significant insights into the links between call centre work and women’s empowerment, identity and mobility (for example Basi 2009), nationhood, the racialisation of national histories and global economic integration (for example Poster 2007; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015). All of this literature has opened important routes and lines of research, with a prevailing focus on women workers, particularly in the context of outsourced call centres in India or the Philippines (providing English-speaking services to the UK or United States), where call centre work retains the important promise of *middle-classness* – an ‘aura of white-collar respectability’ (Bear 2007: 2) – for its young recruits. In central and southern Europe, the sector is much more connected with the ‘shrinking of the middle-classes’ (Sassen 1998: 46) and neoliberal labour market reforms, expressed in a high incidence of casual, precarious and unprotected forms of employment – aspects that are equally apparent in the Portuguese context.

My aim is to dialogue with this literature from a contrasting context. I will argue that, in Portugal, the joint feminisation and devaluation of call centre labour has pushed male operators to mobilise hegemonic masculinity as a form of capital, with the purpose of mitigating the potential emasculating effects of

inclusion in a feminised sector and middle-class precariousness. Contrary to the much-repeated thesis of an undergoing ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Newman 1988: 139; Mills 2003: 54; Ong 2006), the Portuguese context provides evidence of how the intensification of employment precariousness may lead to the valorisation of gender as a form of capital and structure of (dis)empowerment.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I address how historical prevailing features sustaining gender inequality are reinforced in the Portuguese call centre labour process. Next, I explore how male workers display and mobilise

hegemonic masculinity as a form of gender capital, deployed as a resource of self-valuation (within the workplace) and social mobility (outside the workplace). In the concluding notes, I elaborate further on the contingent aspects of the Portuguese call centre setting pertaining to the interplay of precarity, gender and (dis)empowerment. At a broader level, I argue for the usefulness of exploring and developing further the under-theorised notion of *gender capital*. Doing so will enhance the elicitation of emerging historically and contextually situated reconfigured patterns of gendered hierarchies and structures of (dis)empowerment in the neoliberal service economy – and beyond.

### **Managed voices**

When any of us contact a call centre, the first aspect we come to know about the person answering the call at the other end of the line is their voice. Those working in call centres have many tasks (for example data input on specific software applications, answering and replying to emails, forwarding client’s requests, writing information on the computer using the keyboard, pressing buttons on the telephone), but their voice – the act of speaking – is the operators’ main tool of work. If management is to put into effect ‘profitable working bodies’ on the shop floor (Salzinger 2003), it has to intervene in the hierarchisation of gendered bodies and their parts, such as voices. This is done through the commodification of masculinity and femininity in the services provided to the client, and through the differential valuation of male and female voices and the skills they represent.

The call centre sector in Portugal employs close to 1 per cent of the national active population and has been growing steadily since the early 2000s. The great majority of call centres provide services to the internal market in various private and public sector businesses. Also, in most call centres, the adopted model for labour recruitment and hiring is a partnership with temporary agencies of work. User firms contract the services of temping agencies, which are in charge of selecting and recruiting future workers, defining employment contractual conditions and processing wage payments. Inside the workplace, labour control is shared by the user firm and the temping agency. Usually, operators and team leaders are temporary workers, while team coordinators and high-ranking professional categories are permanent workers of the user firm. This is the case at EVA. Similarly to other countries, call centre job posts have been mostly occupied by women. They represent the majority of the workforce, particularly those in their mid-30s, living in urban centres and possessing higher education qualifications. Contrary to the common setting of the feminised call centre, my ethnographic research was conducted in a highly male-dominated environment: a technical support helpline with 52 men and 2 women. Nonetheless, the male-dominated technical unit that I followed more closely is in daily articulation and relation with other helplines constituted by mostly female operators. While at the company, I also had access to other call centres, and it was notorious that commercial helplines were mostly occupied by women and technical helplines, by men. The prominent sexual division of labour between commercial and technical support was sometimes vaguely suggested to be related to the fact that commercial helplines were ‘designed to deliver information’, while technical helplines were more ‘demanding’ in terms of both the information provided and the creativity required. Management

representatives denied the existence of a deliberate strategy of gender segregation, emphasising instead the existence of a cultural consensus regarding men's greater ability to perform technical work:

I think the social understanding which is rooted in us [Portuguese] is that technical areas are areas for men. This means that if a client calls a technical line and he is answered by a man most likely he will be more satisfied and reassured than if answered by a woman. Concerning commercial helplines it will be the reverse . . . I think that socially we still have that orientation . . .

(Team coordinator)

Often, managers and coordinators mobilised the static and recurrent culturalist argument to justify a dominant gender idiom that associated a female voice with availability and docility, and a male voice with certainty and determination. However, as emphasised by Salzinger (2003: 151) in relation to the 'trope of productivity femininity' within Mexican *maquiladoras*, gendered subjectivities are not culturally ready-made; rather, they are 'made on the job'. At EVA, the feminisation of work tasks is not the only profit-maximisation strategy. On the contrary, the devaluation of feminine skills coexists with the valuation of masculinised skills. This is mainly the result of the specific architecture of labour value extraction organised and enacted on the shop floor.

## Gendered

In most Portuguese call centres, the management's aims of profitability are initially laid out through a contractual commercial relation set out between the user company and the temping agencies. This commercial relation pre-exists and determines the labour relation between employee and employer that will be established on the shop floor. The commercial contract signed by the user company and temping agency defines a service-level agreement (SLA) for each helpline, agreed by both parties, according to several factors, including the type of client targeted, the flow of calls or the business sector area. At the call centre shop floor, operators are required to abide by certain quantitative and qualitative work requirements, which are monitored by specific methods of disciplinary mechanisms, methods of (labour time) quantification and surveillance. Labour control presupposes an unequal gendered valuation of skill, which is indispensable if EVA is to control the levels of profit initially projected in the SLA.

The agreement signed between EVA and the services provider (temping agency) stipulates a part of 'fixed costs' and another of 'variable costs'. The fixed costs for the client (EVA) can be established according to each hour of the operator's work, each call answered or the total number of calls answered per month. The 'variable costs' change according to the SLAs established between the two parties, and define common goals for the number of calls answered per hour and day, the average duration of each call, etc. If the temping agencies do not achieve the standard specified in the SLAs, it is their responsibility to compensate the client (EVA) in monetary form.

EVA defines qualitative and quantitative targets of work output for both commercial and technical helplines. Operators need to abide by standardised rules of emotional display and speech, which strongly determine the emotional/linguistic content displayed in their interactions with clients. Workers need to show amiability and sympathy towards the client ('to have a smile in [their] voice'), to use a consistent set of salutation expressions ('Hello, my name is X, how may I help you?'; 'To call the client by their first and last name'), to follow pre-established speech acts of politeness ('Say "thank you" before and after the hold'; 'When you put the client on "hold", you should regularly return to the line, the client should not wait more than 2 minutes'), and use selective words and expressions to manage the client's emotional state ('Make your speech positive by eliminating negative expressions'; 'Present alternatives to the clients before presenting

limitations'). Workers' phone calls are recorded and stored in a specific database to which only coordinators and team leaders have access. The calls are routinely monitored by the team coordinator and the team leaders, by either tracing the calls in real time (that is, 'silent listening') or by randomly choosing a call from the database. In addition, workers' daily output is measured according to a prior target of number of calls answered during the day and per hour, the average call duration, or the time spent by each worker on breaks and lunch time. Team leaders deliver a productivity daily report to workers, on the basis of which weekly individual or team meetings are scheduled to discuss results.

The prominent tendency within call centre work is for language commodification to be shaped by a strong feminisation of the frames conditioning the way of talking on the phone (for example Cameron 2000a, 2000b). In addition to a strong standardisation of language use, within call centres *styling* involves establishing frames for how to talk – and these frames are symbolically coded as feminine: '[T]he style is gendered, produced through a consistent and deliberate preference for ways of speaking that are symbolically coded as "feminine"' (Cameron 2000b: 333). At EVA, although both commercial and technical support operators have to follow standard grids on *what* to say, *how* they say it is determined by an unequal gendered valuation of skills, as a result of differentiated contractual conditions under which commercial and technical operators have to balance qualitative and quantitative work requirements. Distinct contractual conditions allow management to exercise control over the enactment of (less valued) feminised and (more valued) masculinised ways of speaking.

### **Feminised massification and masculinised customisation**

At EVA, commercial helplines are prominently contacted by private/residential clients and have a relatively constant flow of calls. The service agreement between EVA and the temping agency is based on a fee paid according to the total number of monthly answered calls. Operators' verbal interactions with clients are strongly scripted, allowing for a short duration of each call and decreased speech creativity. Scripting calls aims to fulfil work productivity, while meeting the client's expectation of feminised sympathy, demeanour and docility. Operators are formally and informally instructed to ignore personal insults, aggressions and abuse – an aspect reinforced by a wage structure dependent on the number of calls answered. Full-time operators have a daily target of 2,300 points, receiving 2 points for each call answered. If operators exceed the target, they are paid €0.50 per call answered. Technical helplines have contrasting conditions, with a lower flow of calls and monthly fixed costs according to number of hours of work contracted. Although operators need to be polite and show 'a smile in their voices', they do not have answering scripts and the pay structure does not include incentives. Male operators need to 'show security and determination in their voices', and are constantly reminded of the imperative of avoiding technical errors, which lead to the dissatisfaction of corporate clients.

Commercial and technical operators are conditioned by the same formal mechanisms of discipline, quantification and surveillance. The management's aim is common: to monitor how operators balance quantitative and qualitative work requirements. The difference, though, is that if management and temping agencies are to control the progress of different contractual conditions stipulated in the SLAs, the devaluation of feminised skills and the valuation of masculinised skills is required. At EVA, gender is an important tool of competitive advantage, enabling undervalued feminised massification (in commercial helplines) and valued masculinised customisation (in technical helplines) of customer care.

The commodification of feminine subordination and masculine authority at the core of EVA's value extraction regime is facilitated by contingent historical and culturally embedded features vis-à-vis women's condition between subordination and emancipation in the labour market.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the commodification of a gender hierarchy is also enhanced by precarity and

gendered projects of social mobility among the male ‘500 euros generation’ currently working in call centres. In the context of intensified precarious employment conditions and unfulfilled projects of social mobility, male call centre operators are able to mobilise and display masculinity as a form of cultural capital, structuring their own projects of self-valuation and status.<sup>5</sup> This *gender capital* is expressed on the call centre shop floor, particularly through a set of practices and discourses that configure a form of ritualised sexism, and outside the workplace, as an asset conferring power and status to its owners.

## Gendering precarity

In Portugal, Aboim (2010: 158) notes that, despite observed generational discontinuities, ‘the ultimate ideological barrier between men and women has not been broken down. Ideals related to motherhood, and to a lesser extent sexuality, still promote the difference between two gender “natures”.’ The perpetuation of these two gender ‘natures’ implies the persistence of unequal power relations between the sexes, as well as a material and discursive idiom of male domination (expressed, for instance, in men still having more access to public power, and women still carrying the burden of domestic work and childcare responsibilities). The two gender ‘natures’ to which Aboim (2010) alludes are informally and formally mobilised by management in the contemporary call centre sector – as shown earlier. The cultural idiom of female inferiority and masculine superiority is reproduced through the call centre labour process, by delivering to clients gendered products of labour congruent with the dominant national gender order (Connell 1987)

The enactment and performance of gender differentiation among male operators’ daily work is directly related to structural conditions framing the livelihoods, aspirations and meanings of the precarious generation currently working in call centres. The majority of my interviewees were originally from Lisbon and born after the April 1974 revolution. More than half the workers interviewed are either studying at the university or have already completed their degrees. The majority of the parents of the persons interviewed migrated to Lisbon, particularly during the 1970s, looking for better jobs and living conditions for them and their children. They are representative of the most qualified and trained generation since the 1974 Carnation revolution, having been exposed to the ‘middle-class effect’ (Estanque 2003), as expressed in better life conditions than their working-class parental generation, access to higher education, and enjoyment of the civic and social liberties of the democratic period. This young generation was the focus of investment by their parents’ projection of middle-class distinction and the state’s aim of fulfilling the obligations of modernity and progress associated with EU integration. As in other southern European countries, Portuguese young precarious workers manifest feelings of dispossession, shame and stigma owing to the unrealisation of projects of social mobility and middle-class status (Matos 2012).

Call centre workers confront a reproductive and status crisis: they have ‘fallen from grace’ (Newman 1988). The lack of material means with which to ensure the realisation of respectable adulthood through economic independence, marriage and children is further intensified by the incapacity to fulfil the expectation of upward social mobility. Following other authors who have consistently argued that precarity is not a gender-neutral condition (for example Fantone 2007; Vosko 2009), I want to add that historically situated gendered meanings and relational patterns interact with labour value regimes in ways that affect people’s ability to deploy gender as a resource of self-valuation. In Portuguese call centres, valued hegemonic masculinity emerges as a form of capital that allows the recognition of masculinity as a:

... conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, [a] social alchemy [that] produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural

capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time.

(Bourdieu 1986: 50–51)

At EVA, the male workforce's compliance with management's goals of female subordination and masculine authority commodification is manifest in a shop floor culture of assertive masculinity, shaped by the enactment of ritualised sexism. In addition, gender as capital is also mobilised as a means of self-valuation outside the shop floor.

### **Gender capital in and outside the shop floor**

Male call centre operators regularly plan physical activities outside the workplace, such as car tuning, street racing, 'LAN-parties', football matches and working out in the gym. The planning of these activities within the workplace affords male operators the opportunity to distinguish themselves (from their female colleagues) as workers who assert their embodied masculinity as a value, which enables them to be in control of their bodies and emotions, in contrast to the stereotype of the 'naturally sensitive woman'. On the shop floor, male operators' assertion of the value of practice over theory (Willis 1977) further enhances assertive masculinity as a bodily capital (Wacquant 1995).

Male operators show an obsessive enthusiasm for the latest technological equipment (routers, mobile phones, web software, etc.). Colleagues usually refer to each other as 'technological geeks' who are more interested in touching the equipment and learning its internal workings than in speculating which is best, based on the advertised characteristics. By mastering the latest technological novelties, male call centre workers encourage the belief among new and old colleagues that their tasks involve a certain 'mastery' that the commercial helplines (composed of women) do not have. The group of male operators that I followed more closely used the equation 'masculinity = technology' as a way of exercising power over their female colleagues on the commercial helplines. By 'exercising power', I mean presenting themselves as more dynamic, rational and proactive than their female colleagues on the commercial helplines, whom they subordinate as 'inauthentic workers' (Cockburn 1985: 185). 'Technological mastery' is claimed not only on the basis 'that men have a natural leaning to technology', but also as a form of achieving recognition among peers for work performance. The masculinised appropriation of high-tech objects within call centres resembles cultural capital in its objectified state (Bourdieu 1986: 50), insofar as these objects are symbolically invested by agents with properties that sustain a gendered and unequal distinction among the workforce.

The practice of ritualised sexism is widely disseminated in the shop floor and usually expressed through jokes, aggressive macho humour, badinage and chauvinism. Sexist jokes often involve the objectification of women. Sexist jokes, either sent out by email or said in person, abound among male operators and they all tend to ritualise sexism as a form of asserting the superior value of masculinity, praising the 'values of virility' (Bourdieu 1979/2010: 383–385). Male operators' adherence to the practices and discourses that constitute ritualised sexism actively reinforces management goals of embedding gender in the commodified products of labour. The commodification of a gender regime lends itself usefully to the goals of providing the client with the expected service – that is, with the expected male or female voice. Outside the workplace, the mobilisation of masculinity as a form of cultural capital by male call centre operators is first put into effect with a view to disguising their precarious workplace status within the private realm of the family, but also as an asset in the pursuit of individual projects of social mobility, with the purpose of pushing the boundaries of class status. When comparing themselves with their parents and in daily interactions with the nuclear family, male call centre operators mobilise their technical expertise as a way of stressing that they were partly successful in their projects of social mobility and class status



Most my interviewees often stressed their parents' appreciation of call centre work as not 'real work' (that is, devalued and precarious). This was their way of telling me that they were aware of their parents' sense of frustration and their own sense of shame for being engaged in a form of work lacking the prestige and social status corresponding to the expectations of their parents. Operators' feelings of unrealised accomplishment were further strengthened when comparing their trajectories with those of their parents. For instance, Victor (aged 32) explained that his father worked for 30 years as a factory worker in a renowned shipyard located in the southern margin of river Tejo. Although Victor's father's work was heavy, manual and physically demanding, he was able to have job security, which allowed him to have a family, buy a house and ensure a minimal dignified old age with the certainty of a state pension. Victor is aware that, for his generation, being able to achieve such stability and respectability is much harder. Nonetheless, Victor also emphasised that his knowledge about computing technology was many times mobilised by his father, who 'is completely ignorant about mobiles! He doesn't even know how to send a text message!' Victor's knowledge of computing technology was underscored not only with regards to small daily issues – such as the mobile – but also when suggesting that computing technology involved specific forms of mental reasoning not demanded of factory work. In more hopeful moments, Victor and his colleagues spoke widely concerning the wage levels of people employed by companies such as Google or similar, particularly in comparison with their parent's wages in the past. The possibility of being able to convince themselves and their parents that they might one day work in a company such as Google and earn a lot of money (that is, prestige and money) was one of the ways through which male operators mobilised technology as a way of misidentifying themselves with their working-class parents.

As noted by Skeggs (1997: 74), the experience of class is often articulated by a 'refusal of recognition rather than a claim for the right to be recognized', which, for male call centre operators, entails devising strategies (for example disidentification and dissimulation) to negotiate, contradict and deny the class positioning and gendered value of their work. Unlike their working-class parents or their female colleagues in the commercial lines, they have technical expertise. Male call centre operators recurrently remarked that their parents' sense of frustration at finding their sons within a job that did not fit their qualifications was a matter of disguised shame and frustration. To counteract these feelings, male call centre operators self-designate themselves as (male) 'technicians', not (female) call centre operators.

This means that while they may experience conditions of employment insecurity, they are investing in fulfilling their own and their parents' dreams of social mobility by gaining work experience and improving the deployment of technical skills. Male call centre operators' self-identification as 'technicians' is reinforced by the fact that their call centre experience of technical provision facilitates access to masculine social networks related to programme software companies, as well as other companies in the informatics sector. Male operators are sometimes able to move into better paid and socially valued programme software companies, and they often strategically invest in particular relationships with hierarchical superiors with a view to manipulating these good relations in the future for their own benefit – that is, of being able to access, through male friendship networks, jobs with higher status and prestige, according to public opinion, than those in the call centre sector.

Male call centre workers mobilise and enact masculinity as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), which allows them to redefine/enhance their workplace and class status vis-à-vis their female colleagues and their working-class parents. My male informants perceive and act on their own condition through '*gendered habituses*', or gendered dispositions (Bourdieu 1979/2010), and in doing so they both reproduce (unequal/hierarchical power relations between the sexes) and transform social reality (in a contingent manner, by disguising their workplace and class status). As shown by Carla Freeman (1998, 2000), femininity can be deployed as a form of cultural or symbolic

capital with the purpose of pushing the boundaries of workplace and class status. The author's research in the offshore informatics industry in Barbados reveals how women workers actively contribute to the redefinition of their occupational and class status by converging with corporate interests in creating a 'professional look' through the use of fashion and dress. There are striking contrasts and similarities between Freeman's research context and mine. Whereas, in Barbados or in India, the informatics sector is seen as containing the 'promise of modernity', in Portugal the call centre sector has been demonised as the main locus of middle-class precariousness. Despite this contrasting context, the most important similarity is the convergence between management's goals of profitability or 'professionalism' and the form(s) through which gender enables individuals – with a form of capital – to be simultaneously complicit in management goals and to dispute socially imposed identification(s) either with blue-collar workers (in Freeman's research) or with precarious, unprestigious and feminised work (in my research).

### ***Gender capital as a structure of (dis)empowerment***

Call centre firms capitalise on gendered hierarchies to best deliver to the client the 'expected service'. They do so by operating in accord with gender stereotypes, which define female voices as sweet and docile and male voices as assertive and competent – a distinction that is reproduced in the division between commercial and technical helplines. At EVA, the specific organisation of value extraction is underlined by an unequal gendered valuation of skills. Management deploys several formal and informal mechanisms for controlling and disciplining the enactment of gendered skills, with the final aim of fulfilling customer expectations of docile femininity and masculine authority, while also pursuing the profitable dual strategy of undervalued feminised massification and valued masculinised customisation of customer care.

The commodification of feminine subordination and masculine authority at EVA is mediated by specific economic and cultural trends pertaining to the recent history of Portugal, which have conditioned and shaped gender-based inequalities in labour and employment. At the core of this national contingency are the specific conditions under which women have accessed formal employment and civil rights, following almost forty years of a patriarchal dictatorship. Analysis of these conditions reveals the unfinished process of gender equality that began with the Carnation revolution in 1974, due to structural vulnerabilities attached to an underdeveloped welfare state and an economy based on low wages (Cardoso 1996). I am not arguing that the recent history of the country determines the gender hierarchy activated at EVA's call centres, but that it works as a frame of legitimation for the practices and discourses engendering the mobilisation and deployment of labour power. The available literature on gender and call centre labour has concentrated excessively on analysing the feminisation of this particular kind of work and its consequences for women (for example Belt 2002; Ng and Mitter 2005; Basi 2009), while neglecting analysis of how the relational and hierarchical aspects of gender, informed by contextual specificities, can be subjected to commodification under contemporary capitalism.

Ultimately, EVA's mobilisation and deployment of a gender order beneficial to the valorisation process is an aspect long emphasised by critical feminist theory. Capital accumulation is not only accumulated labour, but also 'an accumulation of differences and divisions within the working class, whereby hierarchies built upon gender, as well as "race" and age, become constitutive of class rule and the formation of the modern proletariat' (Federici 2004: 63–64). Several authors have vividly explored how gendered ideologies contribute to capital accumulation, focusing particularly on the functions of reproductive labour within the capitalist system (Costa and James 1975; Mies 1986; Redclift 1988; Fortunati 1995). Such authors have criticised the Marxist notion of productive

labour for not treating the tasks involved in the reproduction of labour power – such as caring, feeding or nurturing people – as productive work. As partly stated by Hochschild (1983), when these tasks were transposed to the market, they remained subordinate to men’s work. The call centre regime of labour, besides presenting an advanced apparatus for the exploitation of inherently human communicative abilities, also allows for the reproduction of women’s subordination, showing clear continuities with labour regimes in the past.

Following Graeber’s (2001: 86) invocation of the Marxist labour theory of value, the differential value ascribed to femininity and masculinity in call centre labour results from its embeddedness in a ‘totality’ – the dominant gender order – which is not reducible to the workplace. Social agents – both female and male – draw on this totality for the resources with which they can pursue their own individual projects of value – that is, their individual projects of social mobility. But to realise their value, agents need, as Graeber (2001: 87) points out, a point of comparison: an ‘imagined audience’. In the Portuguese call centre sector, such an audience – that is, the call centre gender regime congruent with a dominant gender order – acts as an unequal system of value that both enables (men) and constrains (women), thereby conferring power to one part of the workforce, while restricting the freedom of another.

The interplay of gender, precarity and projects of social mobility among the male operators whom I followed more closely shows that the intensification of the neoliberal regulation of wage employment may not necessarily lead to a ‘crisis of masculinity’. On the contrary, specific labour regimes informed by contingent historical and cultural factors may facilitate the strengthening of hegemonic masculinity. This is the case in the Portuguese call centre sector, where male operators strategically deploy valued masculinity as a way of counteracting their integration into feminised labour and feelings of middle-class precariousness.

As a counterpoint to the most prominent tendency in the call centre literature, I suggest that, in Portugal, the feminisation of serving is not the only orientation adopted by management to fulfil profit goals. In the Portuguese call centre sector, male domination prevails over a devalued and feminised labour regime – that is, femininity and masculinity within the call centre sector are not ‘two sides of the same coin’. The asymmetrical value of femininity and masculinity results from the mutual reproduction of two kinds of accumulation strategy corresponding to two different forms of capital, both built upon contextually national specificities and global neoliberalisation processes. This asymmetrical valuation is institutionalised in the labour process through a gendered redefinition of skills grounded on a cultural grammar of the inferior status of women and femininity and masculine superiority, and another that derives from male call centre operators’ investment strategies in assertive masculinity as a form of *gender capital*, allowing them to negotiate their status in the workplace and within society at large.

## **Acknowledgements**

This chapter is a revised and developed version of earlier research work on gender commodification and inequality in the Portuguese call centre sector. Research for this chapter was funded by a doctoral grant awarded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT, SFRH/BD/27684/2006) and the writing has been partially funded by the European Research Council (ERC) grant ‘Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood’ (GRECO) (IDEAS-ERC FP7, Project no. 323743). I want to thank Megha Amrith and Nina Sahraoui for their trust, encouragement and valuable comments.

## Notes

- 1 Mukherjee (2008) and Patel (2010: 36–40) make a similar point for the call centre and software export sectors in India.
- 2 From 2011 to 2014, Portugal underwent a structural adjustment programme imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission. The austerity debt regime imposed was shaped particularly by policies of labour devaluation.
- 3 It is estimated that, between the 1950s and 1974, 2 million Portuguese left the country.
- 4 For a broad overview of the historical and sociological patterns shaping Portuguese women's entrance into the labour market, see Silva (1983), Ferreira (1993, 1999) and Torres (2009).
- 5 Constructions of masculinity and femininity have been differentially affected by increasing employment precarity. This is due, in particular, to the uneven social constraints shaping women's and men's pathways of intra-generational social mobility. In one of the few studies concerning gender and social mobility in Portugal, Mendes (1997) concludes that, especially for women and in contrast to men, educational credentials were decisive in increasing the levels of inter-generational social mobility. In a later publication, the Mendes (2006) indicates that educational credentials have progressively lost their structuring effect on women's trajectories of upward mobility and in narrowing gender-based differences in social mobility. In contrast, men's patterns of inter-generational social mobility remain the same in the two studies conducted. In particular, unlike working-class women, working-class men develop 'upward trajectories inside their workplaces due to seniority, to work skills and to social networks', which constitute 'an important means of social mobility that depends on male workers' personal and social capital' (Mendes 2006: 14–15).

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