

STUDY
PUBLIC RELATIONS/CUSTOMER
SERVICES
AND
THE HEALTH OF FEMALE WORKERS
SUMMARY OF RESULTS OBTAINED

September 2004

Socio-Lógica Investigaciones

Introduction.

Public relations has traditionally been a feminised profession for which almost no qualifications have been required. Today, and due largely to the development of telecommunications and means of transport, public relations is a sector that is continually developing, for which a higher level of training and preparation is required and which provides an opening for the growing number of women seeking jobs. These changes force us to review the way in which occupational health is treated by introducing an approach focused on gender as a specific element of analysis.

The Federation of Communications and Transport of CCOO (Spanish Workers' Committees Trade Union) has developed the **ALBORDE Project** on *"Public relations/customer services and the health of female workers"*, co-financed by the EC's **Leonardo Da Vinci** programme. The aim of this project has been to analyse the living and working conditions of female workers in order to propose trade union actions based on analysis and reflection.

In this context we have promoted a transnational association that aims to improve the training of people who are involved in collective bargaining, risk assessment and the design of prevention plans in the sectors or subsectors of communications and transport both at national and European level.

Different trade union organisations have taken part in this project, including the Transport and General Workers Union (T&G) (United Kingdom), Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Trasporti (FILT- CGIL) (Italy), and Vasutas Dolgozók Szabad Szakszervezete (VDSzSz) (the Free Trade Union of Railway Workers) (Hungary). The "Miguel Escalera" Training and Employment Foundation (FOREM) has also been a partner in this project.

The core product of this project is a didactic material for the training of training officers. The characteristics of this material and its objectives are geared to offering occupational health managers and training officers in both companies and in bodies acting as legal representatives of male and female workers with the necessary resources to facilitate the performance of their work in the prevention of occupational risks, keeping in mind biological, psychological and social aspects.

The comparison of analyses performed in the partner countries has enabled each country to achieve progress in this area, by comparing working environments, the objectives set in relation to this issue and the methods and dedicated resources available in each area.

We hope that this project has helped to reveal the health differences between men and women based on gender and biological differences and to provide maximum dissemination of the training materials developed as the end product of this project.

The study, the results of which are presented here, was developed in order to contribute to the improvement of the living and working conditions of female workers. It is closely linked to the study/experiment carried out previously at our federation entitled *Salud Laboral: diferencia de género* (Occupational Health: gender differences), published in 2002, and which focused on the prevention of occupational risks associated with the compatibilisation of family and professional life and the fair distribution of domestic chores between men and women, with psychosocial risks and with permanently hidden or unperceived risks such as psychological wear and tear, fatigue and stress.

We must review the current concept of occupational health taking into account the changes that have taken place in recent decades in both occupational aspects and in society in general. It is also important to review the traditional discourse on the health of female workers, since this has focused almost exclusively on reproductive health.

The Federation of Communication and Transport is working to foster the necessary changes by adopting an alternative perspective that will enable us to tackle gender issues by means of an interdisciplinary approach and by considering crossovers between the problems studied. It is from this perspective that Eleonora Menicucci refers to the need for a TRANSVERSAL VIEW that goes beyond the analysis of occupational risks and deals with the interaction of domestic and social time..

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Confederated Secretariat for Women's Affairs

STUDY OF FEMALE EMPLOYEES WORKING IN CUSTOMER SERVICES.

(SUMMARY OF RESULTS OBTAINED)

PRESENTATION

The study population consists of the group of women and men who work in customer services in the communications and land and sea transport sectors.

Given that this sector presents a high level of feminisation, we consider that it should be analysed taking into account socially and culturally constructed gender differences.

The study consisted of analysing and interpreting the significant aspects deriving from the performance of their work duties, as well as an in-depth study of collective symbolic representations, i.e. how their conscious and unconscious interests, beliefs, expectations and motivations are structured.

The general categories addressed in this study are the following:

- The perception that women have of their jobs and their personal circumstances.
- Conditions of employment.
- Significant problems.
- Demands and solutions.

These general categories encompass numerous more specific aspects that are detailed and analysed in depth, but always bearing in mind that they must not be understood as absolute or invariable, since each subsector has its own specific differential features.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology has been used because the research objectives cannot be addressed by means of quantification or measurement.

The social research techniques used were discussion groups and in-depth interviews. Specifically, seven discussion groups and one in-depth interview were organised. The participants belonged to the following subsectors: air stewardesses¹ and check-in personnel, sea liner STEWARDESSES, train stewardesses, female ticket office workers on suburban and metro railway lines, and telemarketing operators.

¹ Passenger Cabin Crew (PCC): this professional category will be referred to using the colloquial term “air stewardesses/stewards”.

By analysing their language, expressions and the way in which they construct their sentences we can gain an insight into the social reality of this social-labour group as represented by the participants.

The Discussion Groups were organised in the following way:

- Metro ticket office female workers.
- Sea/cruise liner stewardesses.
- Air stewardesses.
- Interview - ground stewardesses/STEWARDESSES.
- Female teleoperators employed at a telephony company.
- Train stewardesses.
- Female workers employed at a telephone company.
- Female employees working in railway ticket offices.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

GENDER

A series of changes have taken place in Spain in recent decades that directly affect women, namely an increase in their level of training and qualifications accompanied by an increase in the female employment rate.

However, this increase in the number of employed women has not occurred on an equal basis in all socio-professional categories. As a result, there is a very high level of feminisation in certain professions, whereas in others the presence of women may be considered to be almost anecdotal.

This situation raises the question as to the extent to which the majority presence of women in certain professions contributes to the social devaluation of these professional categories.

Public relations has traditionally been a feminised profession for which almost no qualifications are required. Today, and due largely to the development of telecommunications and means of transport, public relations is a sector that is continually developing, for which a higher level of training and preparation is required and which provides an opening for the growing number of women seeking jobs.

Paradoxically, despite the fact that the qualifications required for working in this social-professional category are increasingly more demanding, the social recognition of this profession continues to be very low, particularly for women compared with men working in this sector.

In order to understand this situation, we may begin by looking at the definition that appears in the María Moliner dictionary for the words "atender" (to attend

to) and “atención” (attention), in order to unearth their latent meaning and thus unveil the inherent connotations to both gender-associated stereotypes and the roles traditionally considered to be exclusively for women. In this way we will also shed light on the mental structures in relation to power and authority and the discrimination factors that abound.

“Atender” (to attend to):

To learn what a customer or member of the public wants and serve them.

To take care of.

To deal with a person’s requests, complaints, etc.

“Atención” (Attention):

An act of courtesy or kindness with which one attempts to please or satisfy a person or show them esteem or affection.

The first definition of “atender” (attend to) is related to some extent to the professional sector studied here. The other definitions indicated above reveal aspects of the action itself and the substantive or noun corresponding to roles traditionally assigned to women and female attributes, i.e. stereotypes. Women look after [others] (bring up children), women satisfy needs, women seek harmony in their environment (the home).

The functions encompassed within the profession developed – public relations/customer services - are “naturalised”, i.e. the duties that they have to fulfil in their posts correspond to “functions typically associated with women”, intrinsic to the fact that they are women.

What merit or social recognition will their profession receive if what is required or demanded for the realisation of these jobs forms part of the essence and attributes of women?

How are women who work in this profession expected to be able to exert a certain degree of power or authority, and be considered to be reliable?

These questions are the driving principle of the study and open the way for reflection on the variables that configure this perspective of gender.

Discrimination in relations with men does not appear so much in connection with the post they occupy (often the same post), but rather the physical, social and cultural fact of being women. The exercise of power is contrary to the “female stereotype” of subordination and submission to the hierarchical authority of men, since, from a cultural standpoint, authority is not a female feature.

PUBLIC RELATIONS/CUSTOMER SERVICES

The progressive developments in telecommunications and means of transport have generated the demand for more female and male workers in the services in the sectors the object of this study, i.e. telemarketing and transport.

On the one hand, companies have introduced marketing and advertising as means for optimising and increasing their profits, with resources directed at a public that is potentially a consumer of their products.

And on the other hand, the relatively recent phenomenon that could be referred to as the “democratisation” of travel services, in the broadest sense of the term, has consequently fuelled an increase in the demand for these services by a growing number of users.

In both scenarios, these changes have generated an increase in the number of jobs in these sectors, which has lead to a larger number of women occupying these types of posts.

Growing competition between companies from the same sector prompts companies to incorporate marketing strategies geared to **public relations/customer services** in order to optimise company results, such as, for example, employee training and loyalty measures.

This study analyses the way in which this dynamic influences the working conditions of male and female workers performing public relations/customer services duties.

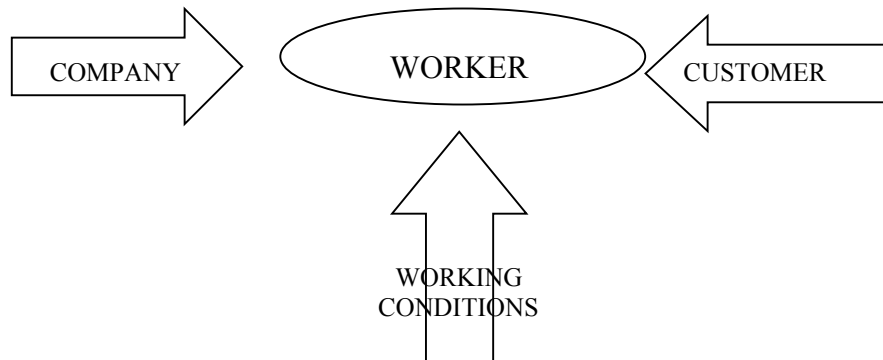
SUMMARY TABLE OF COMMON AND SPECIFIC ASPECTS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS/CUSTOMER SERVICES

COMMON ASPECTS		SPECIFIC ASPECTS
PUBLIC RELATIONS/ CUSTOMER SERVICES	– Aesthetics vs. Comfort	Telemarketing
	– False stereotype of little physical effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Telephone as a means for relating with customers – Telephone: eroticised medium – Hierarchy
	– Dehumanisation and robotisation	
	– Social distance	
	– Being at the service of customers	
	– Mental overload	
	– Requires vocation	Metro and suburban railway lines
	– High valuation of work	Service provided through a window or over a counter
	– On-going learning. Psychology	
	– Gratification: the customer	
	– Visible figure of the company	
	– Style manual	
	– Control systems	Air stewardesses
	– Complaints are more common than praise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stereotypes of stylism and high demands – Democratisation: worsening – Consumption of alcohol – Aggression
	– Treat all customers in the same way	
	– Dealing with the public ends in burnout	
GENDER	– Women do not have power	
	– Latent erotism	
	– Vulnerability Defencelessness	
	– Insults, humiliating treatment and abuse	

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

FACTORS RELATING TO PUBLIC RELATIONS/CUSTOMER SERVICES

- **Three-fold source of stress.**



Professionals working in public relations/customer services in these sectors experience three potential stress factors: firstly, the demands of the company since they are normally the persons who presents the direct image of the entity; secondly, the demands of customers who use increasingly threatening behaviour, which is becoming more common; and, finally, the structure of specific working conditions, which include the organisation of work, the design of workposts, etc.

- **Aesthetics versus Comfort**

Uniforms are not ergonomically designed and no consideration is given to the working conditions that these women and men have to endure when designing, choosing and introducing uniforms. The uniforms are chosen according to criteria based more on aesthetic values than on ergonomic factors, and this affects both men and women in different ways (tight skirts, high heels, hard shoes, nylon stockings, scarves, etc.) The opinions of male and female employees are not taken into account.

- **A smart personal appearance is considered to be something that does not require much effort.**

There is a collective belief, as a generalised stereotype, that working in public relations/customer services, the style manual of which demands a smart and elegant personal image, cannot be a job that requires any effort, and that, instead, it is an easy and simple job that does ruffle the person's image. In reality, these professionals have to make great physical efforts, spend long periods standing on their feet, carrying heavy weights, enduring adverse weather conditions or attending the public by telephone or personally for many hours each day, and at the same time always

maintaining their composure and the smart image demanded by the company and which they accept.

- **Dehumanisation and robotisation**

It has been noted that public relations/customer service professionals are affected by a degree of depersonalisation and robotisation. This is more evident in some sectors than in others, for example, in sectors in which communication is by telephone or directly at the counter or window. These professionals are treated as if they were anonymous machines and this is worsened by the fact that in some sectors the work is repetitive and mechanical in nature, such as in telephone customer services.

- **Social distance**

Another generalised stereotype is that when interacting with public relations/customer services personnel, a social distance is imposed between them and the customer, which is revealed through language, behaviour, postures, and non-verbal and, above all, uniform communication. There is a commonly accepted collective belief persons requesting services or approaching such professionals are not talking to people but to a "post" representing the company in question, since there is a symbolic correlation that implies social distance.

- **"Being at the service of customers"**

There is still a tendency in our society to confuse "service" with "servitude". This refers to the underlying notion that prevails in the collective imagination and which often prompts customers to believe that they are socially superior to these professionals, and that they even have some extent of power over them, i.e. that they are at their service to use them as they wish.

"Serving" is a job that is considered to be feminine from a social standpoint; "servitude" has the connotation of "being at the service of", which implies an appropriation of the person and reflects stereotypes that women themselves interiorise and reproduce.

- **Mental overload.**

These are normally jobs that require physical activity that is strenuous to differing degrees depending on the sector in question, but above all involves continuous mental activity. Workers have to be alert at all times, without dropping their guard, and remain fully concentrated during the time they are dealing with a customer. This normally induces a state of mental overload, which requires a great deal of time and effort to reduce or eliminate after a day's work, particularly in the field of Telemarketing.

- **Vocation.**

This is considered to be a prior requisite for this job, which “you must like”. Employees must also have specific personal characteristics such as patience, charm, assertiveness, friendliness and they must also be balance individuals.

The skill to perform this type of job is considered to be sociability and consider people and contact with them as a pleasant task that satisfies the persons performing same.

- **“High valuation of work”.**

Women working in public relations/customer services have an extremely professional attitude towards their work. Professional public relations/customer services personnel develop their own palpable identity. Daily learning when performing their duties with customers of all types provides them with a multitude of skills and teaches them to both know how to treat different people with whom they interact every day and develop skills to overcome any problems that may arise in the course of their work. Presumably, these everyday events make them feel very prepared for and professionally capable of performing their duties successfully.

- **On-going learning, psychology.**

Working in a job that involves dealing with many different customers every day means that female workers experience a huge variety of very different situations and attitudes. Continual interaction with customers provides these female workers with skills and abilities to tackle adverse situations, resolve conflicts and avoid any confrontations that may arise.

The skill of the female or male worker is the factor that determines the control of the situation and the delimitation of the service. Female workers refer to this skill by saying that “you have to be a psychologist” in order to work in this field.

- **Gratification comes from the customer**

The work performed in these sectors is either product sales (telemarketing and metro) or public relations/customer services. Workers do not expect any type of gratification for the number of people they have attended or a bonus for productivity; the only gratification or reward that they may receive will depend on their relationship with customers. Common to all subsectors is the satisfaction or gratification that female workers feel, for example when just one of the people that they have attended explicitly shows that they are happy with the service received. The customer’s smile, their complicity or

gratitude are, in addition to rewards, sources of motivation for them to continue performing their jobs in an affable manner.

- **"Female workers as the figureheads of the company"**

Public relations/customer services professionals are, during the hours that they occupy their workposts, the **"visible figures"** of a company. In most cases, it is increasingly common for these professionals to wear a uniform, which fulfils two functions:

1.- Uniforms make all customers recognise them as representatives of that company. This makes them visibly available to customers in order to provide them with information, services or deal with any consultation that customers wish to make.

2.- All the female employees are aesthetically united by a uniform; in this way there are no personal aesthetic preferences but only the image of the company for which they work.

- **"Style manual"**

Companies normally have a **style manual** for all their female workers. These manuals contain the guidelines on how to respond in each situation with respect to customers. They provide guidance on types of behaviour in specific situations, language when giving information to customers, specific actions with more demanding customers, problem solving, how to wear the name label on their uniforms or the hairstyle specified by the company when they are at work.

In short, these are behavioural rules that affirm **corporativism** and contribute to the depersonalisation of female workers to the benefit of the company that they represent.

- **"Control systems"**

Companies have their own systems for controlling employees. They hire the services of external companies, normally consultancy firms that perform timely evaluations of workers in public relations/customer service departments. In this way they obtain qualitative information on the way in which their employees attend their customers and whether they fulfil the pre-established customer services objectives.

- **"Complaints are more common than praise"**

Companies with suggestions boxes and other types of strategies obtain feed-back from their own customers, as a way of determining whether their customers are happy or unhappy with the service offered by the company.

However although customers may provide both positive and negative information on company workers, this feedback is much more often provided to present complaints.

- **Treat everybody in same way because everyone is a customer**

Workers are obliged to treat all customers in the same way. There are no different categories of customers, all of them pay for the services rendered and are treated in the same institutionalised or bureaucratised way by companies, regardless of whether the customer is friendly or despotic, richer or poorer; they all have to be treated on an equal basis and the attention given to each customer must be the same.

On a broader scale, the maxim "the customer is always right" has become an "institutionalised" slogan associated with public relations/customer services.

- **Dealing with the public ends in burnout**

Another general aspect that has been observed among public relations/customer services professionals is that their job end up by burning them out. The passage of time produces a sensation of saturation that appears earlier than in other professions because personal relations are difficult, generating untenable situations that are difficult to resolve.

COMMON FACTORS RELATING TO GENDER

In the case of women working in public relations/customer services, we may add a fourth stress factor that arises simply due to the fact that they are women. As revealed below, the gender element conditions interaction between female workers and users or customers, particularly in situations relating to power and hierarchy.

- **Women do not have power**

Another gender-related stereotype that rears its head in public relations/customer services relates to the exercise of power or authority.

The public relations/customer services sector is not alien to this fact. The user or customer of a customer service assumes beforehand that female staff lack the necessary authority to resolve certain situations and demand the presence of a superior, who they assume is a man.

On the other hand, the values associated with the female voice are among the qualities required for working in customer services. These qualities are

also reflected in service quality and public relations/customer services training courses.

- **Symbolic erotism**

We find that the stereotype of servitude is reinforced by various sexual stereotypes, such as the uniform that the company forces female workers to wear (short skirt, tight suits, etc.), and which emphasizes the image of the woman as a sexual object who is there for the delight of customers.

This latent erotism in the customer-professional relationship reinforces attitudes of domination and subjugation towards these professionals, aggravating attitudes of lack of respect and humiliations, to which they are often subjected.

- **From a social standpoint, women are considered to be more exposed, insecure, defenceless and vulnerable than men.**

The widespread social stereotype that women are weaker, more exposed, defenceless, and vulnerable than men prevails. A constant characteristic of this society, in which "the law of survival of the fittest" reigns supreme, is that women feel that they are danger, since their own physical integrity and even survival is at stake. In situations of physical inferiority, women are ideal victims targeted for all violence, as well as suffering aggressions of all types.

- **Insults, humiliations and abuse.**

Female employees working in public relations/customer services, irrespective of the sector in which they work, suffer frequent insults and humiliations from users, who feel somehow protected under the maxim of "the customer is always right". Sometimes, the means employed by users of a service draw them into unjustified confrontations, attacking the dignity and consideration of the persons who provide a service.

RESULTS BY SECTORS

SECTOR	WORKING CONDITIONS				
	WORKING HOURS	WORK RATES	ORGANISATION OF TASKS	ERGONOMICS	ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS
METRO AND SUBURBAN RAILWAY TICKET OFFICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continuous hours - Rotating shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discontinuous - Very fast in specific periods and times of the day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sitting down, repetitive movements - Alone at the station - Other tasks when closing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inadequate chairs - Inadequate counters - Uncomfortable uniforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of space - No ventilation - Noise - Artificial light - No WC
TELE-MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 24 h x 365 days - Rotating shifts - Variable working days according to the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fast and continuous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dealing with telephone calls - Sales: direct handling of customers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spaces isolated by glass - Inadequate furniture - Scarce equipment maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Space reduced to a minimum - Noise
SEA STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discontinuous hours - Prolonged breaks in-between - 72 days work and 35 days holiday 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slow pace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boarding and exit - Passenger services, organisation, management and cleaning 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Little space - Shared compartments - Rocking movements induce sea-sickness
AIR STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Variable shifts - Maximum activity: 16 hours - 12 days free per month 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Variable depending on schedules - Sometimes very fast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approx. 250 hours work per month - 80 flight hours - Extract of collective agreement attached 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small spaces - Uncomfortable chairs and uniforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small closed space - Little light - Noise - Pressure - Radiation
LAND STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rotating shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very fast - Overbooking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Versatile - Check-in - Boarding - Passenger services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Seats in poor condition and uncomfortable - Uncomfortable counters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Noise - Temperatures - Artificial light
AVE STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 12-hour shifts - Two days off on rotation basis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fast, very fast no short-distance routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Variety of tasks: serve comfort and products - Sales, take care of children, cleaning and organisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small spaces - Uncomfortable beds - Uncomfortable uniforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Little space - Pressurisation, noise and movements - Overhead power cables - Deteriorated materials with no maintenance

SECTOR	WORKING CONDITIONS				
	REPERCUSSIONS FOR HEALTH	REMUNERATION	RELATIONS WITH SUPERIORS	TEAM WORK	CONTROL SYSTEM
METRO AND SUBURBAN RAILWAY TICKET OFFICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sleep disorders - Depression - Stress - Digestive disorders, obesity - Sight and hearing problems - Circulatory disorders and LME 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Does not correspond to duties and hardship of the job - No bank holidays or shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tends towards corporativism - Greater understanding and less control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not reflected 	-
TELE-MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Otitis - Hypoacusis - Aphonia - Head aches - Ringing - Stress - Depression - Sight disorders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very low salaries - No fixed remuneration or promotion system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not very fluid Pyramid structure - Physical distancing between departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual separation - Support from colleagues - Rivalry and competitiveness in the Sales Department 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Computer system controls all movements - Targets and penalties - Values system
SEA STEWARDESSES	-	-	Hierarchy, good relations with superiors	Intense and positive	-
AIR STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jet lag - Chronic fatigue - Respiratory disorders - Joint disorders - Circulatory disorders - Hypoacusis - Abortion - Digestive disorders 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good among crew - No relations with the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to work very cohesive 	Customer claims
LAND STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stress - Digestive disorders 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very good, just another employee 	Fluid and positive relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spies - Customer claims
AVE STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abortion - AMES - Otitis - Circulatory disorders 		Very good with crew, sense of being abandoned by the company	Very fluid, cohesive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Spies - Claims

SECTOR	VIEW OF THEMSELVES-OWN PERCEPTION				
	LIFE OUTSIDE OF WORK	PERSONAL BALANCE	FEELINGS	RELATIONS WITH COLLEAGUES	BUILDING OF PERSONA
METRO AND SUBURBAN RAILWAY TICKET OFFICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Little time for family dominated by work - No social life - Double shifts - Leisure time spent at home - Resignation - Take stress home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feeling of guilt for not looking after home - Feeling of being a bad mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Little quality of life - No compensation for effort - Lack of comprehension - Loneliness - Psychological exhaustion - No way out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Affective relations at work - Sentimental ties with colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not fulfilled by work - Rejection of their post - Lack of choice - Alienation
TELE-MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dictated by work - Absorbs energy - Causes bad character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feeling of guilt in Call Centre - Other departments: work is priority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Desire to improve in Call Centre - In other departments, desire to perform at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Induced by shift systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In sales department personal fulfilment through work. - Initial positive bond that then turns to burn out.
SEA STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Incompatibility - Long periods without seeing family or friends - Abandonment - No maternity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Maintain balance without conflicts - Cannot change job - Monotony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Miss family, but accept that this is their job - Loneliness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very marked due to much time together on board the vessel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Need to feel fulfilled at work - Unlikely they will find something else - They like their jobs
AIR STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Little free time - Dictated by work timetables - No hobbies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fulfilment with job - Maintain emotional balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abandonment of the family - Responsibility towards passengers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Due to shifts and being enclosed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belonging to a team - Balanced, elite and work is source of wealth
LAND STEWARDESSES	Little time for leisure and family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Useful at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Due to organisation by shifts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Their jobs occupy their lives
AVE STEWARDESSES	Incompatible with free time, friends or family Discontinuity	Job dictates life, everything is dominated by work Seniority= experience	Insecurity High valuation of the post Time passes disappointed, tiredness	Favoured by the organisation of the job	Belonging to an elite group High level of professionalism Continuous challenge due to abandonment by the company

SECTOR	VIEW OF THEMSELVES OWN PERCEPTION		CLAIMS/ DEMANDS	SOLUTIONS
	GENDER	ABSENTEEISM		
METRO AND SUBURBAN RAILWAY TICKET OFFICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aware of unequal treatment - More acute in case of younger workers - Lack of respect - Insinuations - Invisibility 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of staff - More frequent breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alternate weekends free - Dispensing machines - Establish times for taking lunch
TELE-MARKETING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Aware of discrimination in Call Centre - Rest: competitiveness, no solidarity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No substitute system - Affects colleagues - In other depts.: for shorter working days for maternity targets not reduced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abuse of power - Unfair dismissals due to pregnancy and depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information on all the departments - Substitutions in case of absence.
SEA STEWARDESSES	Treated differently because they are women Difficult maternity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preference for female colleagues 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual compartments on long journeys 	-
AIR STEWARDESSES	Preference for presence of males in the team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Require doctor's note to take sick leave for simple colds, don't take sick leave because they lose their expenses pay 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of staff - Lack of security on aeroplanes - Training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shorter working days - Longer rest periods - Monitoring - Medical controls
LAND STEWARDESSES	Not reflected, humiliations due more to the fact that they are women		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More support from superiors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improve employment conditions
AVE STEWARDESSES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not very marked - Related more to seniority Resentment for losing their youth, company requirement		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intermediary figure between crew and company - No health care or reviews of employment conditions - Studies on repercussions for health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - More rest periods - Optimum material - More comfortable uniforms

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Many of the conclusions that can be drawn after this project have already been addressed in this document and are transmitted by the female workers themselves who participated in the fieldwork in each sector. These workers are the ones who observe and describe situations that affect them every day of their professional and private lives. We set forth below other conclusions which we hope will provide an opening for reflection and make a small contribution to help improve the quality of life of these professionals and parallelly that of all the people with whom they relate.

Insults to personal dignity.

One of the constant characteristics of all the groups studied are the insults and offensive behaviour of public relations/customer service users or customers towards these female workers.

The maxim of “the customer is always right”, coupled with the stereotypes that appear both consciously or unconsciously, particularly those relating to gender, favour the appearance of this type of behaviour, and sometimes out of context.

It seems advisable and appropriate to reflect on and review in depth this aphorism, which is deeply rooted among users and customers as well as trainers and educators in this sector, in order to prevent situations of subordination of female and male workers to users, avoid disrespectful behaviour and contribute to the valuation of this profession at social and cultural level, imbuing it with the necessary authority and jurisdiction.

It does not seem appropriate to attribute stress factors solely to stress, to which in general the entire population is subjected, using them to explain or justify this type of conduct, although this is a factor that may sometimes emphasize them.

Paradoxically, the public relations/customer services sector cannot be roboticised or mechanised completely as occurs in other sectors. Precisely due to the characteristics studied in this paper, public relations/customer services cannot always be supplied with a dispensing machine. Professionals in this field do not deserve to be treated like dispensers. Therefore, one extremely beneficial action could be a **mentalisation** and **awareness-raising campaign** that promotes the respectful treatment of the people who serve us when we use specific services.

Participation of the workforce in decisions that affect the performance of their duties.

It is important to highlight that the perception of the dehumanisation of working conditions was reflected by all the groups analysed. These are normally

determined by business interests and/or customers. Improvements are required that involve workers in the taking of decisions that affect the organisation of work, the design of work posts, the preparation of uniforms, ergonomic aspects, etc., since this would avoid many potential problems that may undermine the health of female and male workers. This requires planning taking into account the differences between individuals in terms of, for example, height, physical complexion, right-handed/left-handed workers, etc.

Consideration must also be given to the need to open channels for recording and communicating the demands that affect them in order to improve their working conditions and quality of life, since this is often a question of introducing small and accessible changes that can substantially improve the whole working environment.

Organisation of work

As it happens, the increase in occupational stress rates above standard levels is related to working in conditions of fatigue for prolonged periods.

The term “burnout” has been used indiscriminately to explain and correct situations through actions that are nothing more than attempts to avoid investigating the factors that really cause stress and fatigue in workers.

The current approach used to analyse the situation of workers focuses on mitigating the consequences of an invisible force that establishes working conditions that seem to be immovable, without addressing the causes and phenomena that cause them.

The training of male and female employees working in the sectors analysed here should focus on the transformation or revision of general or specific working conditions that negatively impact their physical, mental or social condition, rather than prepare them to deal with increasing levels of stress or fatigue.

Working hours. Shifts

Workers are also constantly demanding the review of the organisation of working hours and studies to be carried out of the consequences of shift work. The arguments presented by professionals with these types of rotating and flexible timetables focus on the number of physical imbalances, health disorders and other problems caused by this system.

NEW CHANNELS FOR DISCUSSION

The problem detected in the public relations/customer services sector is part of a general structural scenario relating to the configuration of work.

Modern democratic societies, characterised fundamentally by massified consumption, are immersed in a process of transformation and change that affects both society as a whole and the individual, giving rise to a new form of socialisation and individualisation. Our society displays a clear and gradual tendency towards ideological and political abandonment, which is reflected in a new conception of work.

The class awareness associated with relations in the workplace has been replaced by a new individual attitude towards work.

Starting from the basis that work is a channel for the construction of identity and for social participation, it would be advisable to reflect on the role that work currently plays in the configuration of personal identity, especially in the case of women.

Which structural factors are influencing the fact that working conditions are increasingly precarious and at the same time force individuals to accept them unconditionally? Work is seen as the core of life that even modifies the scale of needs and becomes one of the main sources of self-esteem for individuals.

It is also important to consider reflecting on the role played by social agents in this new social-labour scenario.

These and other questions are open for debate in order to establish channels for resolving and improving labour conditions, which are appropriate from a global perspective and transcend merely individual scenarios.

Reflections and Proposals:

General conclusions on the overall results of the debate generated in connection with the development of the "Public Relations/Customer Services and the health of female workers" project, which consisted of:

- ⇒ A first phase, essential in order to understand the real situation, and comprising a study of the work and health conditions of women in three professional categories of communications and transport sectors in four countries of the European Union.
- ⇒ Development of didactic materials to be used in training courses for training officers and occupational risk prevention officers, and development and evaluation of the pilot experiment.
- ⇒ A training seminar to reflect on and debate the results of the study with the people involved in the project, female workers, male and female trade union delegates, risk prevention experts, Occupational Health and Collective Bargaining Managers, in order to make proposals for the improvement of

the working and health conditions of these collectives, to disseminate and promote the didactic materials and activities in order to generate synergies, and disseminate and capitalize on the experiences of the members of this transnational association.

REFLECTIONS:

- ◆ Men and women fall ill in different ways and this is closely linked to problems of gender, more stressful work, lower salaries, less independence, inadequate ergonomic conditions etc. Progress can be achieved by showing that the same risks can affect men and women in different ways. Remember that what is not acknowledged does not exist.
- ◆ Identify gender-related risks in risk evaluations in order to be able to design prevention plans that modify the traditional prevention-orientated culture.
- ◆ Women do not form a homogeneous group. Their diversity must therefore be taken into consideration. Effective measures are required that improve the balance between work and private life, take into account the working hours of men and women and foster the reconciliation of public and private spaces (work and home).
- ◆ There is evidence of the social and economic devaluation of traditionally feminised categories, specifically in relation to the Public Relations/Customer Services tasks the object of this study.
- ◆ It is important to keep in mind the risks arising from the organisation of work coupled with psychosocial risks, double shifts, sexual or moral harassment, since the combination of all or some of these elements places women in positions of greater risk from a health perspective.
- ◆ The organisation of work is clearly important, and can be achieved through the control of working hours, working days, leave authorisations, flexible timetables etc., since this is the cause of a large number of health risks affecting mainly women, such as anxiety, stress and fatigue.
- ◆ Women face greater obstacles in terms of access to jobs, such as more precarious hiring conditions, temporary work, part-time work and wage discrimination, as well as other problems relating to the organisation of work, and which have a negative impact on health. They also receive insufficient social support and little reward for the work that they perform.
- ◆ Our aim is to promote measures and share experiences and resources with the Member States of the EU. Each country must study its specific circumstances with respect to gender and health in order to adopt appropriate measures.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- Need for specific training to identify and evaluate risk from a gender perspective.
- Foster greater awareness and knowledge within the different Technical and Legal Committees of the trade union on possible demands and conflicts.
- Integrate the gender perspective in collective agreements and risk prevention plans.

- Achieve the participation of women in decision-taking and particularly by supporting their presence at bargaining meetings.
- Uniformity must be treated as a ergonomically-designed work tool suitable for the function that it is designed to perform, and doing away with its current function as an element to promote the image of the company with erotic connotations, with the subsequent harm that this situation causes among women.
- Provide support to increase and improve public social services, in terms of attention and assistance provided to children and dependent individuals.