

Gender equity and emotional labour in the workplace: an ethnographic study in Romania

Study Overview (English)

Romania's recent economic growth is contrasted by persistent challenges in the labour market, particularly gendered pressures facing university graduates within the services sector. This paper investigates the structural and interactional expectations placed on female university graduates employed in Romanian call centres. The study is informed by two years of ethnographic fieldwork, spanning June 2021 to June 2024, which included participatory observation and semi-structured interviews in call centres. By exploring dynamics of emotional labour, gendered occupational segregation and structural mechanisms of inequality, the study adds qualitative nuance to an existing body of literature regarding gender inequality in the work place.

Study Overview (Romanian)

Creșterea economică recentă a României contrastează cu provocările persistente de pe piața muncii, în special cu presiunile de gen resimțite de absolvenții universitari din sectorul serviciilor. Acest articol investighează așteptările structurale și interacționale impuse absolventelor universitare angajate în centrele de apel din România. Studiul se bazează pe doi ani de cercetare etnografică de teren, desfășurată între iunie 2021 și iunie 2024, care a inclus observație participativă și interviuri semi-structurate în centre de apel. Prin explorarea dinamicilor muncii emoționale, segregării ocupaționale de gen și mecanismelor structurale ale inegalității, studiul aduce o contribuție calitativă relevantă la literatura existentă privind inegalitatea de gen la locul de muncă.

The current 'Evidence Bits' is based on the publication: **Isirabahenda, G., Marina, L. and Mucea B. N. (2026) Gender equity and emotional labour in the workplace: an ethnographic study. *Frontiers in Sociology*. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2026.1742870.**

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Study Background

Economic Growth and the Service Sector in Romania

Romania's recent economic growth has been driven by a trend towards the service-based sector, which accounts for 51% of total employment in the country. The top four industries within that sector are banking, insurance and financial services; technology and telecommunications; business and professional services; and industrial and consumer goods.

Corporations in high-income countries often outsource service-related tasks to call centres to lower-income countries – in this case Romania.

While this demand for employment has contributed towards the development of higher-education in Romania, it has also created a disparity between graduates' professional qualifications and the standardised and gendered employment opportunities available to them.

**Map of Romania
divided by
development
regions.**



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Key Findings

Point 1

Gendered Occupational Segregation

- Even though women numerically outnumbered men by 39 to 22 in the workplace where the study was conducted, men occupied 73% of managerial positions while women occupied 72% of entry level roles.
- Despite women's numerical dominance, their limited representation in leadership positions illustrates the persistence of systemic barriers to career progression.

Point 2

Emotional Labour Expectations

- Organisations enforce rules encouraging employees to exhibit cheerful, friendly and patient demeanours while dealing with customer complaints and met with verbal aggression.
- These standards disproportionately affect women, who are expected to exhibit greater emotional resilience, adaptability and self-sacrifice than their male counterparts.

What is Emotional Labour?

According to the study, emotional labour is “the process of managing feelings and expressions to fulfil job requirements” (3). In the context of support centres, this includes being confronted with customer complaints as well as verbal aggression.

Based on the study, the emotional burden is typically placed on women and contributes towards gendered inequalities in the workplace. Emotional labour, the authors explain, “is often seen as a way for women to gain recognition or get promoted, but recent research shows that it usually keeps them in certain roles” (4).

Emotional labour is shaped by structural factors – such as societal norms and cultural assumptions – while simultaneously reinforcing those stereotypes through interactional dynamics in the workplace and with customers.

Point 3

Structural Mechanisms of Inequality

- Organisational mechanisms exacerbate inequality through de-skilling, credential inflation and reliance on social capital.
- Customer support roles are highly standardised and technologically controlled, reducing autonomy and creativity.

Key Policy and Practice Implications

There are several key recommendations that can be made from the study:

Dismantle Vertical Segregation in Leadership

- Women fill 72% of entry-level CSR positions while men hold 73% of management positions. Policies should formalise promotion tracks, ensuring that female employees can access leadership roles and avoid being trapped in frontline positions.

Recognising and Compensating for Emotional Labour

- Emotional management is often seen as a "natural" feminine trait rather than a professional skill. To address this, practices should treat emotional labour as a technical competency by explicitly including it in job descriptions, evaluating it during performance reviews, and factoring it into compensation structures.

Reform Recruitment to Break Closed Networks

- Reliance on internal referrals, which account for 75% of hires, privileges those with strong social capital and can exclude women and marginalised groups. Organisations should diversify recruitment channels and implement merit-based hiring to reduce gender hierarchies.

Address Credential Inflation and Deskilling

- Many call centres require university degrees for repetitive, scripted tasks, leading to deskilling and high burnout, particularly among highly educated women. Policies should align job requirements with task complexity or assign graduates to more strategic and less routine roles.

Formalise and Reward Mentorship

- Female employees frequently mentor new hires without recognition or compensation. Management should formalise these roles and credit them as leadership development rather than categorising them as nurturing work.

Protect Employees from Workplace Abuse

- Customer service representatives, particularly women, are often expected to tolerate verbal aggression from customers while remaining calm and composed. Organisations should strengthen supervisor intervention and enforce zero-tolerance policies for customer abuse to protect the mental health and dignity of frontline staff.

Mitigating Identity and Cultural Strain

- Requiring employees to adopt American accents or shorten their names creates identity strain and emotional dissonance. Policies should support authentic self-expression at work and provide resources to help employees manage cross-cultural customer's mistrust.

Key References

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