

‘Telephone Girls’ at the Frontline of Third World Telephony: The Turkish Case Between the 1950s and the 1980s

The long and complicated work history of women at Third World countries’ national switchboard centrals is a crucial but largely overlooked aspect of the history of telecommunications and the feminist history of labour regimes. By focusing on the Turkish case between the 1950s and the 1980s, this article aims to unveil the authoritarian labour regimes that the telephone girls were exposed to in relation to the capitalist developmentalism, state-led cultural modernisation and nationalism policies of Third World countries. The archival and oral history research conducted with the female operators show that women at the centrals were expected to compensate for the deteriorated infrastructure, function as the surveillance apparatus of the state, and educate the male public to engage with modern and secular gender relations through their sacrificial and caring emotional work. Women have developed their own strategies of survival and struggle against this labour regime through their work practices and solidarity mechanisms.

Keywords: telephone operators, labour history, women, feminist history, Turkey, Third World, telecommunications, developmentalism

Introduction

The critical historiography of telecommunications has shown the co-constituted developments of telecommunication infrastructures and technologies, the implementation of colonial, imperial and neoliberal global rule and the renewal of structural dependencies of the Third World on Western capital, technology and know-how across different phases of capitalism.¹ In an attempt to overcome the structural conditions of dependency on the Western world, many Third World countries have adopted state-led industrialisation programmes and capitalist developmentalism, which was essentially designed in the West ‘to integrate the Third World into the post war politico-economic order’.² In these developmentalist programmes, the telecommunications networks were considered to be essential for the establishment of national accumulation, well-functioning state machinery, national security and the modernisation of rural and traditional populations.³ While these programmes have indeed generated some degree of infrastructural development of telecommunications in these peripheral countries of global capitalism, they could not overcome the dependency relations between the Third World and the West. Nor could the national telephone services fulfil the increasing customer demand for telephony. This was also the case in Turkey in the Cold War era.

Residing in the periphery of global capitalism and modernity, Turkey integrated services into the communicative sphere as early as the 1880s. However, it took almost a century for the country to establish a relatively well-functioning and evenly distributed national telephonic communications. Particularly after World War II, in the face of rising consumer culture, urbanisation and industrial capitalism, the ownership and use of the telephone has become increasingly integrated into the middle class social imaginary and the state developmental plans. On the one hand, the state continued to invest in telecommunication infrastructure by extending the reach of cables and signals, and also by increasing the number of manual centrals for the national and international telephone

exchanges. On the other hand, the investments could never suffice to overcome the futility of state-run telephone services. From the early 1950s to the late 1980s until the automation of the centrals and the extension of telephone cables to provincial areas carried out under the neoliberal regime, the disproportion between demand for and supply of telephony remained intact.⁴ Since the state could not find a solution to increase capital investment in the telecommunication infrastructure in order to fulfil the demand of customers within the context of 'internationalised capital infrastructure and division of labour',⁵ they turned to changing the managerial and labour regimes to maximise the productivity of telecommunication services through the work of labourers. This managerial decision had significant effects on the work conditions of female telephone operators. Neither the critical historiography of telecommunications in the Third World context, nor the feminist labour history addressed the work history of Third World female operators that were placed at the frontline of failing state telephony. This article aims to fill this gap, by showing how the female operators at the Turkish telephone services were tasked to overcome the futility of telephonic connections, which were imagined to be essential for the institution of state capitalism, national industry and trade as well as for the construction of the political and social order.

The feminist labour history in telecommunications reveals that positions at the telephone centrals were feminised in the early years of this technology in order to make a connection between male customers and the new technology.⁶ Under the rules of capitalist logic, women were considered to be apt for this position mainly for two reasons: they were cheap,⁷ and believed to possess the inherent qualities needed in a manual switchboard system.⁸ The skills required for the female mediation of telephone interactions were based on a woman's capacity to employ her voice, personality and body to please the customers as well as the male managers.^{9 10} In this labour regime, the work of the female operator was defined and regimented as a 'labour of love' in which the operator was expected to deliver her service with love and find her reward in the 'love' she received from the subscribers more than in the wages she was given by the company.¹¹ Drawing on Marxist theories of estrangement, Arnie Hochschild conceptualised this form of feminised service as 'emotional labour', and defined it as a distinctive kind of labour where she is required to manage emotions – hers and the customers, by engaging in deep acting whereby she continuously induces her feelings, and performs the 'right' feeling to 'sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others'.¹² Hochschild writes, 'the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself',¹³ and the labour process that exposes the labourer to the category of emotional labour is also a process of subjectivity – 'the specific performativity of emotional labour'.¹⁴

The work life of female operators of state telephony in Third World countries was not exempt from the exploitative conditions of capitalist and patriarchal labour regime that imposed particular forms of precarity (low wages) and definitions of labour (emotional work) on women who chose to earn their own money in available job markets. The non-Western telephone girls were also expected to serve for the ideals of developmentalist, modernising and nationalising state power.¹⁵ In the following article, I examine the wage policies, material conditions of work and performance evaluation systems that the managerial regime of the state telephony imposed on the telephone operators. Furthermore, I also look into the ways in which the labour process has functioned as

subjectification processes for the servants of emotional labour and how it has shaped their sensibilities and survival strategies at work.

Archives and Sources

I rely on two original sources for this research: archival resources as well as in-depth interviews conducted with the former intercity telephone operators who worked at the busiest telephone centrals in return of the lowest wages given by the company between the late 1950s and the 1980s.

The archival resources include the official publications of the state telephony system that show, imply or exemplify the regimentation of the emotional labour of the telephone operators such as: annual reports, employment directories, institutional history books, workers' union booklets and manifestos, and the technical journals such as *Postel* – published from the early 1950s onwards as the main publication of the male administrators of the telephone services. I will also draw evidence from national dailies, as I problematise a historical case where the telephone operator was first used and then stigmatised as a spy of the authoritarian state in the early 1960s. My archival research on the history of telecommunications in Turkey took place between 2011 and 2018, and included several visits to Milli Kutuphane, the National Library of Turkey in Ankara for the institutional publications about the development and labour conditions in telecommunications; the Ataturk Kitapligi Library in Istanbul for the journalistic representations of telephone services and operators; and the Basbakanlik Devlet Arsivleri National Archives in Ankara for the state documents as well as policies on the telecommunications sector.

The interviews¹⁶ were conducted in Turkish between 2011 and 2013 with 20 former women telephone operators who were fifty years or older. The women were from different cities: Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey, which was once the capital and which has always received the largest inflow of both foreign and domestic migration; Ankara, the current capital; Diyarbakir, the city with the largest Kurdish population; and Kayseri, one of the major strongholds of Islamic conservatism in the country. The interviews focused on how the women remembered their work, how they negotiated or contested the labour regime, and their responses to ideological pressures and constraints imposed on them as mediators of these highly surveilled state circuits.

Background

The first female Turkish telephone operators at the manual switchboards were feminist activists who started a campaign in 1913 to work at the Constantine Telephone Company, which was co-owned by European entrepreneurs and run by a British engineer.¹⁷ The activists were writers of the then leading feminist magazine *Women's World* and they protested against the company's decision to employ only non-Muslim women residents of Istanbul to work at the centrals. For progressive and nationalist feminists, it was not only the Islamic patriarchal system that they had to fight against but also European imperialist policies that prevented Muslim workers from being placed in significant occupational positions.¹⁸ In the end, the protests led by the authors and readers of *Women's World* achieved their goal of changing the employment policy of the company and Muslim women

started to work at the company as central operators. The female elite activists of this campaign considered the fight for the positions at the innercity and intercity centrals as an integral part of their national and feminist struggle.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the nationalist-modernist agenda became an official ideology of the state and shaped all state projects and policies. The Turkification and modernisation of the technoscape as well as the social and economic landscape of Turkey were crucially important for the Republicanists, whose aim was to create an independent state. In line with this policy, in the early 1930s, telephone services were expropriated by the state and grouped with postal and telegraph services as part of an institution called the Organisation of the Post and Telegraph (PTT). The PTT quickly automated the innercity services where the non-Muslim telephone operators worked and opened a number of positions at the intercity lines in major cities for Turkish-speaking modern and secular women. Under the Republicanist interpretation of Fordist labour regimes, women in the national telephone centrals were expected to perceive and perform their work as an integral part of their citizenship duties. In doing so, the women were expected to cultivate an affective attachment¹⁹ with the institution that opened up opportunities for women to work and emancipate²⁰ themselves from the boundaries of traditional, religious and family life. Until the end of World War II, both the telephone and the operators remained as symbols of Republicanist modernism and secularism with limited functionalities.

Feminising the Failure

The 1950s brought major societal changes to Turkey, from the strategic alignment with the US in the Cold War era, the rapid agricultural industrialisation, to the massive flow of internal and external migrations to big cities in Turkey and to Europe as guest workers, and to urbanisation projects. The ownership and use of telephony has come to be integrated into the social imaginary of the middle class as well as to the state developmental plans that aimed for the rapid development of national industry and trade.²¹ Under the state import industrialisation developmental plans,²² the state has continued to make investments in the telecommunication infrastructure and increased the number of switchboard centrals in big cities. Further infrastructure efforts extended the reach of cables and signals to a number of cities in more provincial territories of the country and established small factories and technical schools to develop national telecommunication industry and know-how. However, the developmental plans of 1962, 1967 and 1977 reveal that the state was neither able to correctly predict the increase in public demand for telephone nor to provide sufficient supply to potential telephone users. By 1962, there were 192,000 subscribers but 183,000 people were still on the waiting list, while by 1977 the number of subscribers had risen to 851,000 but with 1.3 million people still on the waiting list.²³ Previous research on the social history of Turkish telephony shows that the journalistic representation of telephony within this period was largely structured by complaints about the telephone services. These criticisms centred on the noise and distorted sound transmission along the telephone lines, the long waiting hours to place a call and the high cost of telephone ownership and use.²⁴

Faced with a crisis of rising public discontent about the national telephone services, the male administrators of the PTT developed a strategy to overcome the futility of telephony by defining the problem on two axis – the technical inadequacy of infrastructure and the lack of good customer relations. The technical improvement of the infrastructure and machinery was a continuous concern and point of discussion where the technocrats proposed different economic and technical models to extend and improve the reach of telephone services under the rules of state capitalism. Since the development of telecommunication infrastructure required long term planning and the mobilisation of limited national resources whose control was in the hands of the government, the PTT administrators focused more on the managerial and labour regimes that would maximise productivity through the intensification of labour and the extension of service workers' job descriptions. In this guise, the female telephone operators were claimed to have a key role 'in producing good customer relations', where their 'beautiful and cute voice', 'devotion to the public service they perform' and 'sacrificial personality would help the PTT to institute a positive public image as well as to provide a satisfactory communicative service despite the limited performance of the machinery system'.²⁵

In the employment directories of 1948 and 1950, the PTT listed the required skills and manners of the telephone operators on the bases of 'good audible skills and vision', 'right tone of voice', 'Istanbul accent' (which implies the exclusion of women with Anatolian, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek and other accents), 'self-control and self-discipline especially at the times of high traffic of telephone exchanges', 'respectful and polite character', 'the memory skills for remembering the numbers and names', 'quick comprehension and understanding' and 'availability for the night shifts'.²⁶ Establishing these criteria for the eligibility of telephone operators, which were largely taken from the Western models such as Bell, the PTT instituted a more organised and disciplinary fashion of employment procedure for the telephone operators. An article from 1952, written for the *Postel* by a male manager of the PTT shows that the underlying criteria for the search for the ideal telephone operator was defined on the basis of her skills to suppress her feelings (anger) in order to create a self that relentlessly performs her emotional labour for the happiness of the customers and managers:

The telephone operators must be very serious, respectful and polite in her talking, and calm in her behaviour. They need to act in this way not only in their relations with the customers and their colleagues in the centrals, but also in their communications with other PTT personnel. Regardless of where the complaints come from, who voice them and with which style they voice the complaints, the telephone operators must embrace the suggestions and critiques with utmost respect and satisfy whoever she communicates with in a calm and sincere way. If there is one thing that does not reconcile with the requirement of this service, it is the expression of anger. A decent human being is one that knows how to control and discipline oneself and one's anger.²⁷

From the 1950s onwards until the automation of manual telephone centrals in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the female applicants for the positions at the switchboard centrals were systematically employed upon a written and oral examination processes. The switchboard operators would then be subjected to training programmes and practices that

not only aimed for the cultivation of technical and analytical skills but for the production of a self that was totally devoted to the success of the telephone company. Most of the training was led by experienced telephone operators and supervisors where the newly employed telephone girls were taught how to use the equipment, such as headphones, tickets and jags, as well as the rules about priority calls, noise, and the duration limits of telephone connections. Within the period between the 1950s to the 1980s, the telephone connections were categorised and priced as normal, urgent and extra urgent tariffs. The extra urgent calls always had priority over others and costed five times more than the normal tariff. It was the operators' task to categorise all demands for telephone connections on a daily basis and to enable the connections in accordance with the tariff system. Once the operator found an available line in the intercity or international lines to make the connection of the subscriber, she also needed to make sure that the line was good enough to transmit the sound without unwanted noise. If there was an echo or any other transmission problem, the operator had to renew the connection. Before she left the two connected subscribers to talk, she had to remind them that they had a three-minute limit for telephonic interaction and they would be charged extra for every minute after the first three.

Inspired by the US human management models that began to be popular in Turkey in the 1950s, the PTT administrators developed a monitoring system and discursive practices that aimed to increase the productivity of the telephone operators.²⁸ This saw the productivity of workers being placed at the centre of the model and targeted the increase of productivity by employing motivational and emotional tactics for workers to engage in their work and invest in the company. In accordance with this model, the operators began to be evaluated on their daily, weekly and monthly performances. Each operator had a minimum quota for daily telephone connections she would make and a minimum revenue expectation she would bring to the company – thus the priority of extra urgent and urgent calls was ensured. In addition to the quota and tariff system, she was required to bring no complaints to the company about her service. Through the quota and tariff system and the rules of conduct, the PTT aimed for the maximised productivity by mobilising the limited resources at hand. The 1959 annual report illustrates this new managerial regime and the place of telephone operators in this context:

In the last ten years, while the number of telephone centrals, and the manual service exchange increased approximately 25%, the number of telephone operators did not increase as much. Searching for the success of the institution in the sacrificial and patient service of its employers, the PTT administration has instituted a management approach that encouraged the caring and understanding service by appreciating their hard work rather than applying the usual methods of discipline and punishment.²⁹

While the official description of the new managerial regime that imposed new sets of rules on the telephone operators presented itself as an approach based on rewards and appreciation, in contrast the actual organisation of the workload, the formulation of the job description and the performance evaluation systems had become methods of discipline and punishment in practice. Being evaluated in terms of her capacity to make the machinery connect when the infrastructure was inadequate, working for the customer's happiness

when the unavailability of lines was a frequent problem, the discriminatory policies of the tariff system that generated resentment on the part of those who could not afford extra costly tariffs, and performing in the overwhelmingly understaffed centrals, made the work a constant struggle for the telephone operators. The pressure became more and more intense as the telephone services fell short to meet the public demands and the productivity of the telephone company had come to be associated with the telephone operators' performance. In an article from 1968, the author of *Postel* described how the bad service of state telephony was associated with the bad service of the telephone operators in the eyes of the male managers of the PTT:

Having good operators in an institution is like extending a sincere hand to the public. Just as a bad operator could ruin the company, a good operator could win the heart of all customers.³⁰

The systematic exploitation of the telephone operators was not simply limited to the managerial regime of unjust performance evaluation and discursive regimentation that laid the responsibility of failing telephony on the shoulders of the telephone operators. The telephone girls were also among the most disadvantageous personnel in terms of their wages in the PTT. In this regard, they were truly the 'emotional proletariat' of the national telephone services.³¹ The wage policy was based on the nature of the work and the education level of the worker. While the (male) technical personnel such as engineers and administrative personnel had the highest wages and permanent contracts, the telephone operators' work was defined as a support service and had the lowest wages, mostly on temporary contracts. The annual reports of the PTT from 1955, 1976 and 1984 show that in particular, the telephone operators with low levels of education worked in the intercity lines and were placed on the lowest strata of the PTT personnel. This meant lacking job security, earning much lower wages and having very little possibility of promotion or a change of position within the PTT. In contrast, the positions on the international lines were mostly filled by female university students who worked at the PTT during their university studies and left the institution upon graduation to find better jobs. The manifesto written by the members of the socialist PTT union (PTT-DER) in 1977 explicates that the precarious working conditions of women, the lack of social welfare services (housing, child care, etc.), the short span of maternity leave and the poor physical conditions of the switchboard centrals were the main issues that the intercity line operators fought against.³²

Despite the precarious conditions of the work, the PTT continued to be one of the leading institutions that employed women in Turkey from the 1950s to the late 1980s.³³ In a labour market where the majority of employers comprised of state-run companies and institutions, the positions at the switchboard centrals were especially attractive for women who had no schooling relevant for the medical and educational sectors, which were the other two leading sectors that employed women. Particularly by the 1970s, the number of women seeking employment rose and competition began for scarce opportunities as a consequence of male unemployment rates and urban living conditions.³⁴ In such conditions, the positions at the intercity centrals were among the few places for the lower middle class urban women to work. As such, these positions at the centrals were presented as opportunities for single or married women to work in modern conditions with female colleagues in return for regular paychecks.

Working as surveillance apparatus

Working as the human mediator of an individualised and private sonic transmission in the national telephone services of the authoritarian state power brought extra responsibilities and duties for the telephone operators especially at times of political crisis and turmoil. Although privacy of the subscribers was one of the crucial issues that telephone operators had to protect and respect at times of political tranquillity, it was her responsibility to report the conversations of suspicious subjects to the state security officials at times of political turmoil such as military coups. When the machinery did not permit for the centralised and automated surveillance of political citizens of the authoritarian state power, the operator as the loyal servant of the state had to take over the role, and monitor and report telephonic interactions to the authorities. A case from the early 1960s is exemplary to understanding how the telephone operator of state telephony was first used and then stigmatised by the state power for political purposes.

Following the first military coup in 1960, members of the first elected government of the multi-party regime, including the prime minister and some ministers, were accused of treason and tried in the Yassıada trials. During the prosecution of the prime minister and ministers, evidence of the prime minister's treason contained the testimony of an operator working on the intercity lines in İzmir. The operator, Ayten Akturan, told the court that she had overheard the prime minister talking on the telephone while he was planning an unlawful violent action against a local newspaper in İzmir. The monitoring activity of the operator became an issue that was discussed in court, as well as in the mainstream press, in such a way that the operator became known as Telefoncu Ayten, with her private life, including her romantic relation to the prosecutor of the trial, being publicised in the most vulgar ways by the male-dominated media (*Son Havadis*, August 7, 1962). Her private letters, her photographs and even her 'panties' became part of the daily coverage of the tabloid press. According to *Son Havadis*, a politician – one of the successors of the political party that the military regime removed during the coup – had even shown journalists underwear allegedly belonging to Ayten Akturan and found in the prosecutor's apartment.

In the end, Akturan lost her job in the centrals, yet her name continued to be mentioned in media representations of espionage in subsequent years in headlines such as 'The first spy of the country was the telephone girl Ayten' (*Sabah*, February 19, 2014). Interestingly, though, a deputy explained in Parliament how Ayten Akturan had become involved in the scandalised Yassıada trials at the very beginning:

We need to remember that when the military took over the government, they appointed a military officer as a manager to the PTT who urged all operators to inform their executives if they had overheard anything concerning the government's actions on the phone, otherwise, they would be accused to support the traitors.³⁵

Although she eventually became a notorious symbol of the unlawful and unjust trials that had led to the death sentence of the then prime minister of the country, and in the process becoming a symbol of the sexually immoral female operator, Akturan had fulfilled the demands of both the institution and the prosecutors, who were determined to use her testimony in order to destroy the former prime minister's public image and end his life. Her

case shows how the work of the operator was placed at the centre of power relations and conflicts within the patriarchal state. Both the telephone and the operator were instruments functioning like the umbilical cord of the state and of those who hold power within the state. As conflicts arose within the patriarchal state order, the operator proved more useful than the material telephonic infrastructure for she could easily be stigmatised for her (excessive) femininity when her compliance was no longer needed in the new power relations of men. Just as her ability to carry out 'good' work was instituted through her body, femininity and her emotional persona; allegations of her 'bad' work could scandalise through references to her supposedly immoral femininity and sexuality.

Struggle and Survival

In such working conditions in which gendered forms of precarity and traditional patriarchal forms of gender relations affected the ways in which her work was considered disposable and expendable, combined with her position of the 'easy girl' or telefoncu kiz (telephone girl), telephone operators strived to find ways to survive and carry out their struggle to formulate a decent and dignified work life in the PTT. Former intercity telephone operators interviewed in four different cities between 2011-2013 recounted their professional life in the PTT as years of daily struggle as well as intense friendships where they cultivated a form of sisterhood solidarity against the patriarchal regime. A regime that imposed its rules through the discourses of predatory male customers, performance evaluation systems developed by the male administrators and the familial pressure of conservative husbands and fathers who opposed the long working hours and the frequent night shifts. Almost all interviewees belonged to the lower middle class, often with high or middle school degrees, and retired from the PTT upon the automation of the centrals in the late 1980s. The majority of my interviewees used a telephone for the first time in their lives when they began working in the centrals as young single or married women and did not have telephone connections in their own domestic spheres throughout most of their career in the centrals. Thus, they served modern communication services that they individually could not benefit from and whose consumption was largely limited to the privileged classes of the (male) population. The difficulty of fulfilling the requirements of the task at the frontline of the failing telephone services was often recounted in their narratives by pointing out the conflicts rising out of class and gender inequalities between the telephone operators and their customers and the unjust labour regime that systematically and structurally positioned their work at the edge of wrongdoing.

An operator from Ankara, who worked in the PTT from the 1960s to the 1980s stated:

The country was poor and we lacked the means to meet the citizens' demands. Think of a person who does not have bread to eat and serve. We were like that. Not only did we work under terrible material conditions, but we were also expected to create miracles and make customers happy with our service.

Another operator from Istanbul, who was the sole breadwinner of her family, detailed the components of the impossible task:

The job was terribly difficult. You had to be patient as steel. The most challenging part was to deal with the customers. For instance, we had to interrupt connections every three minutes and say 'Sir, it's been three minutes, you have to end the conversation'. They begin, 'how dare you, who do you think you are'. Then you have to repeat the same line, 'sir, there are people waiting in line to make telephone calls. It is my duty to provide them with this service. Then he shouts and shouts. It is prohibited to hang up the telephone on the customer. So you have to wait patiently until he bursts out all the anger. Then you make another connection. The problem was, we also had to make approximately 20 calls in an hour – every call was three min. Otherwise, your service was considered not good enough. We were in an impossible situation.

Another operator from Kayseri, who has spent all her life in this city, remembered the daily routine of proving her morality and dignity in communication with male customers for whom the telephonic connections with women had erotic and sexual connotations.

The people of Kayseri were always somewhat conservative. And according to them, our job was a sort of, how should I say, not a serious, decent job. They saw us as a *telefoncu kız* (telephone girl) ... I mean, like, a telephone girl is someone who does not hesitate to talk to men whom she does not know. People were very much ignorant at the time. There were instances when some of them acted as if we were trying to flirt with them as we called to inform them that they had a pending call from somewhere. We were on the line, 'sir, it's not me who wants to talk to you, it is this person – your uncle or whatever – who wants to speak'.

This operator also stated that despite all the hardship of the work and the lack of appreciation of the value of her work in the centrals by her customers and supervisors, she never thought to resign from her position:

Although neither the customers nor our supervisors valued our work, I always thought and believed that our work was crucial for the unity and security of the nation as well as the state. The manual centrals were the main arteries of the nation. If anything went wrong there, everything would follow and fall down.

Importantly, the modernising state, as an abstract entity, was conceived to be a protector and a refuge for some of my interviewees, particularly in those instances when they were subjugated to the predatory male culture of the customers. In this respect, the discourse that defined her work as that of a public server of national ideals offered the women a justifiable ground to continue their work when the pragmatic drive to be an economically independent woman did not seem to be a good enough incentive. However, their memories also suggest that they found ways to survive by skilfully creating networks of solidarity to find the strength and power to claim agency and to enact micro and macro resistances against the actual material and discursive practices of the labour regime that worked in line with the requirements of state capitalism and modernity. One way in which the intercity line operators created networks was by founding the Association for Solidarity with the Intercity Line Operators, which carried out the role of supporting members to meet their economic needs. This was especially the case in relation to expenditures related

to childcare and education, weddings and funerals. Funds were raised through the collection of membership fees and the organisation of fundraising events. A further example of solidarity was the ways in which the telephone operators created an informal division of emotional work in order to manage the workload of individual central units. An operator from Kayseri recounted:

There were these troublesome channels. For instance, Gemerek who had many subscribers with *Almanci* (guest workers in Germany) neighbours and relatives. It was a tiny place and hence very few channels available for connection. Especially in the summer when the lines were extremely busy, we were placing the calmest and most understanding colleagues on those lines to make connections.

Just as these networks of friendship between female operators were seen to be useful sites for the cultivation of resilience to cope with the difficult conditions of the work, these networks occasionally enabled the operators to create dissident political positions, subjectivities and groups. In particular, during the military interventions – which all of my interviewees experienced at least once in their working life at the PTT – the operators seem to have taken action to negotiate their role in the centrals as state officials, on the one hand, and as human beings, mothers and women, on the other. During the 1980 military intervention that violently crashed the leftist and ethno-nationalist Kurdish movement, the telephone operators were asked to report every telephonic conversation in Kurdish to the military officers. Under the military dicta regime, the private and the public use of Kurdish language was forbidden, making millions of Kurds ‘criminals’ for speaking their mother tongue. An operator from Diyarbakir, who speaks Turkish with Istanbul accent, recounted:

After the military took over the government in 1980, the soldiers began to come down to the centrals every day. We were supposed to monitor and report when suspicious subjects wanted to make a telephone call or when anyone spoke Kurdish. One day, a mother called her son who was doing his military service. She spoke Kurdish of course with her son. I did not report. Then, they noticed that I did not, and began a disciplinary investigation. My only defence was – I am a mother, so is she. After all my colleagues in the central backed me up and asked our supervisor to protect me, I got only a warning.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have provided a historical case study on how women working at the centrals of Third World telephony systems have worked, been trained and disciplined, and negotiated their own agency and subjectivity in relation to the capitalist, developmentalist, nationalist and patriarchal state power and its labour regime. One of the significant common characteristics of Third World telephony in this era was its inadequacy to fulfil the public demand for a clean, clear, cheap and evenly distributed telephone service. This futility of the national telephone systems in these contexts should be linked to the geopolitics of technology and capital transfer, international debt economies, and the Cold War politics that consolidated the structural divisions between the West and the non-West in the political and economic realm. As Yuezhi Zhao noted, the national communication

systems of the non-West cannot be analysed in isolation from the global systems of communications or only in comparison with the Western systems – ‘which tends to flatten asymmetric power relations between the systems under comparison’.³⁶ Nor can the labour and managerial regimes of the Third World developmentalism be dissociated from the logics of world capitalism, patriarchal and authoritarian forms of labour regimes that imposed particular forms of precarity and work definitions on working class women across the world.

My research on the labour history of telephone operators in Turkey at a time when the telephone was increasingly associated with futility shows that the failing service was systematically feminised and gendered through managerial and labour regimes that aimed to compensate for the inadequate materiality of the telecommunication technoscape with the talking and listening services of the telephone operators. Women at the centrals were exploited by the material and discursive practices of the management and labour regimes that discriminated against the emotional labourers of the telephone services through a precarious wage policy, unjust performance evaluation systems and patriarchal forms of social and political relations where the women were always handed the responsibility of any wrong-doing carried out by the institution and the administrative authorities. Under such a regime, the women’s placement at the reception centrals of state telephony has proved useful, not only to overcome the futility of telephony through the operators’ sacrificial emotional labour but also to lay the responsibility of failure – be the failure technical, political and economic – at their feet.

The memories of the lower middle class women who worked in the most disadvantageous positions at the national telephone services demonstrates their experiences of their professional lives as a constant daily struggle as well as the development of intense relationships through friendship with female colleagues as they collectively searched for survival strategies in their work place. As emotional labourers of the national telecommunication systems whose work was rendered precarious by the labour regime of modern state capitalism, the telephone operators formed different networks of solidarity (and sisterhood) – formal and informal, social and economic – to alleviate the destructive outcomes of the wage policies, the unjust performance evaluation systems and the humiliating gestures of (affluent and male) customers. Although some of the institutional ideals purveyed by PTT, such as the narrative that the telephone system and the operators worked for an abstract public good, were internalised by majority of the telephone operators, the women also on occasion created space to negotiate and contest the duties that they were appointed. As such, their professional history in the failing telephone centrals has often been narrated as transformative years in terms of their identity as citizens and public servants, their friendship and solidarity networks, and their relationship to the technical world. Further critical historical research is needed to underpin the labour history of women in the developing technoscapes and telecommunication services of the peripheral contexts of global capitalism and modernity. Female workers in the media and technological world of the Global South were not only fighting against authoritarian labour regimes of capitalism but also against patriarchal regimes of modernisation and capitalisation orchestrated by authoritarian state power.

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- ¹ See Headrick, Smythe, Winseck and Pike, Mody et al, Sussman and Lent among many others.
- ² Luther, *The United States and the Direct Broadcast Satellite*, 61.
- ³ Escobar, Petras, Sussman, Chakravartty, Basaran, Noam.
- ⁴ See Çelik, Basaran.
- ⁵ Sussman, "Global Telecommunications," 290.
- ⁶ Marvin, Rakow, Maddox, Martin, Lipartito, Green, Balbi.
- ⁷ Rakow, "Women and the Telephone"; Maddox, "Women and the Switchboard."
- ⁸ Martin, "Hello Central"; Green "Goodbye Central," 60.
- ⁹ Ibid, Marvin, *When Old Technologies*.
- ¹⁰ Carmi, "Taming Noisy Women."
- ¹¹ Martin, "Hello Central."
- ¹² Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, 7.
- ¹³ Ibid, 6.
- ¹⁴ Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work," 240.
- ¹⁵ See Ramamurthy, "The Modern Girls in India in the Interwar Years" for a brief analysis of the wage policies concerning the telephone central operators in India.
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- ¹⁷ Karakışla, *Osmanlı Kadın*.
- ¹⁸ See Quartaert, "The Employment Policies."
- ¹⁹ See Lazzarato, "Neoliberalism in Action."
- ²⁰ See Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but unliberated?"
- ²¹ Çelik, "The historicity of technological attachments."
- ²² The Import Substitution Industrialization Program (ISI) was the prominent developmental model for the Third World countries that advocated replacing foreign imports with domestic production.
- ²³ DPT, *Kalkınma Planları*.
- ²⁴ Çelik, *ibid*.
- ²⁵ Çakır, "Sosyal Görüşler"; Güner, "Saclarinizi mi tariyorsunuz," 22-23; Güner, "Telefoncularda aralinacak," 7.
- ²⁶ Cited in Güner, "Telefoncularda aranilacak," 7.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Following the strategic alignment with the US in Cold War era, Turkish universities, publication houses, and government agencies began to advocate a 'human relations approach', which was popular in the US context, and critique the German Fayolist tradition, which had been the main inspiration for the Turkish management systems until the end of 1940s. See Üsdiken and Çetin, "From Betriebswirtschaftslehre to Human Relations."
- ²⁹ PTT, *PTT Çalışmaları*.
- ³⁰ Aydın, "Telefon Prensibi," 25.
- ³¹ McDonald and Sirianni in their work on service economy use this term to describe the feminised service jobs in which workers exercise little formal power and are subjected to constant forms of discipline and surveillance. See also Wharton, "The Sociology of Emotional Labor."
- ³² PTT-Der, *Yurtsever Devrimci*.
- ³³ From the 1930s to the 1990s, the PTT was the third biggest institution that employed women in Turkey. The leading institution was the Education Ministry, which employed female teachers, followed by the Health Ministry, employing female nurses and medical personnel, and the PTT, employing female telephone operators. See Citci, "Kadın Sorunu"; Makal, "Türkiye'de 1950-1965." All three institutions together employed 55.7% in 1963, 67.9% in 1970, 69.1% in 1976, 65.4% in 1978 and 60.6% in 1980 of all women working in state organisations.
- ³⁴ Ecevit, "The status and changing," 83.
- ³⁵ TBMM Tutanakları.
- ³⁶ Zhao, "Understanding China's Media System," 147.

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