

What women want — While you were sleeping...

The graveyard shift. While most of us lock ourselves in at night, the metropolis crawls back into its own skin, revealing a susceptibility and the occasional mean streak to those who brave its darker side.

Women who work the night shift come from a remarkably diverse panorama of backgrounds, beliefs and aspirations. Long hours of work, high targets, stress, chronic fatigue and loss of identity are some of the issues these women grapple with. Despite this, some of them are incredibly proud and happy at the end of a job well done. We spoke to a police officer, a doctor, a feminist geographer and a conservancy worker on women working nights, on their safety and their comfort.

Be confident, be safe

Women police officers and constables work night shifts across ranks, patrolling by vehicles and on foot between 9 p.m. and 7 a.m., safeguarding lives and public property, undertaking vehicle checks, providing security to commercial establishments and to people, especially women returning from jobs in call centres, hotels and airports, and early morning walkers. In addition, the occasional gang fight and dacoities at the dead of night are part of what women police personnel, patrolling singularly or in pairs, have to deal with. And, women in the force are proud to work shoulder-to-shoulder with the men to keep the city safe. I wish that women venturing out at night, whether on work or otherwise, learn self-defence, carry the number of the nearest police station and, above all, exude an air of confidence. As a woman, I wish for that edge of smartness in every girl that can come only from education and exposure.



P. VASANTHAKUMARI

*Assistant Commissioner of Police,
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Stay fit

In the medical sector, women have always been assigned night duties. For gynaecologists in government service, night duties are scheduled once in 10 days, and they work 12 hour-shifts in the labour room. Others work at the Emergency, dealing with obstetric, gynaecological and medico-legal cases such as sexual assault. Between 20 and 30 natural births and 15 and 20 Caesarean sections a night, we are under tremendous stress. The Women and Children's Hospital, Egmore, is a tertiary centre, and night duties are demanding, unlike in mofussil hospitals where doctors are on call. However, the demanding duty hours are nothing compared to the joy of saving two lives. Working against the circadian rhythm can affect women's health — causing irregular periods, obesity, weight loss and depression. But, with more women working night shifts, it is essential they utilise their post-duty off for rest and recuperation. A healthy diet and exercise can also keep lifestyle diseases at bay, and I feel women owe it to themselves to stay fit.



DR. S. NIRUPA

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Safer workplaces

When I lived in India, I learned that women call centre employees can be pulled up by police simply for being out at night. Then, I learned that some women call centre workers endure unflattering remarks combined with the stress of social pressure and concerns such as “Who will marry her?” This inspired me to write a book about the societal backlash these women experience, despite the increased income and education associated with call centre work. Ironically, in terms of safety, many women consider the call centres to be far safer work environments than local industries, because the centres tend to maintain standards against sexual harassment.

So, what do women want? A society that re-envisioning them as individuals who have an inherent right to move about in any way and at any time they see fit. This type of re-envisioning—“to travel like a man”— would be truly revolutionary.



REENA PATEL

Feminist geographer and author of Working the Night Shift: Women in India’s Call Center Industry, the U.S.

Basic amenities needed

Conservancy staff work four shifts — the first starts at 6.30 a.m., the last at 5 p.m. Though we leave home as early as 4 a.m., work begins much later, when it is warmer, making it difficult to sweep the mandatory two or three roads we are assigned. Working before dawn has its benefits — the roads are easier to clean, there is less pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and it is cooler. Mostly, we wait by the roadside between shifts, waiting to sign. For, without it, we cannot make a claim if we meet with an accident. Better transportation in the early hours will make commuting to our workplaces easier. We have been issued uniforms, soaps and towels, but there are no changing rooms or toilets or places of rest between shifts. I only wish for our dignity as women to be preserved by providing us at least these basic amenities.



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