

## Glamorous Jobs & Their Challenges: A Study of Flight Attendants

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### ABSTRACT

Women are working in almost all the fields along with men in present times and in the journey of economic empowerment and equality of working status, women have come across new sets of issues as well as hopes in their lives. Women are working in all the departments in airlines as well. There are different roles and responsibilities for different positions. Women working as flight attendants and ground staff are objectified in this industry as they wear uniforms and often their images are used for advertisement and branding for the airlines. There are many challenges faced by women in the society who are utilised as commodities. The present research paper is an attempt to understand the roles and responsibilities of women working as flight attendants, their issues at work and family.

**Keywords:** *Flight Attendants, Role-Conflict, Working Women, Society*

Swarajyalaxmi (1992) argues that working women, irrespective of the profession they are into, have their own set of problems and issues to deal with. They do not erupt all of a sudden, but have valid and consistent social backgrounds for their cause. Women at work have always faced one or the other type of constraints either at house or work place. These issues could be right from the beginning, such as what is the proper age to start working, which professions are more appreciated, what should be the work profile, what should be the work timings, till when can a woman work in life, can she continue working after marriage, and many other such questions arise when a woman is into gainful employment.

The issues turn into conflicts when the scenario is of a patriarchal society where women are expected normally to perform all the household chores along with the work outside home, if they are employed. Women today, are certainly more likely to be working outside the home than ever before. More women must now work to ensure family survival as the wages are declining and the monetary cost of subsistence is increasing. Moreover, there has been increasing demand of women workers in particular sectors of economy, particularly in exports, services and small scale manufacturing.

Swarajyalaxmi (1992) further adds on that women in India are working in organised as well as unorganised sectors. Organised sector in general means labour working in the industries,

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banking and other establishments where they are employed on a full-time basis and are protected from different angles viz., medical, educational, pensions and others.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The present research paper has made use of feminist perspective. 'Objectification' is a notion central to feminist theory. It can be roughly defined as the seeing and/or treating a person, usually a woman, as an object. The concept of 'Role-conflict' has also been used to understand the challenges and role conflict faced by respondents under the present study. For the present research two types of sampling methods were used to identify and select the sample: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. A sample size of 40 respondents was undertaken for the present study. There were 20 ground staff women giving representation to women of different airlines, chosen through convenience sampling and availability of the respondents. 20 flight attendants were chosen through snowball sampling method and availability of the respondents.

#### *Challenges and Issues faced by women working in airlines*

Women working in airlines have certain unique conditions which include- working with fancy and appealing uniforms, make-up on throughout the work time, working the night shifts, working in the confined areas of aircraft in the air without any security personnel and many more. New professions in the corporate world have made women a mode of branding the companies they work for and airlines lead in this. But this has led to complexity of problems and challenges for working women. The condition is even critical in transitional societies, as that in India, because women have just entered working spheres along with men but have not been liberated from traditional roles and responsibilities.

Multiple roles refer to the complex of roles associated not with a single social status but with the various statuses, often, in different institutional spheres in which individuals find themselves. Kala Rani (1976) talks about role in her work and argues that the expected role is different from actual role. The expected role behaviour is not necessarily identical with ideal role behaviour. Role expectations from different social statuses and their fulfilment make up the social system. The research paper discusses the traditional as well as modern roles of women in Indian society. It further analyses the role conflict faced by women in general and working women in specific.

Working women are major victims of role-conflict. Working women perform a number of roles to such an extent that they sometime find it very difficult to play them all. Earlier women were confined to four walls and had narrower sphere of work restricted to household chores. But with times the status of women has changed and they have started working outside home more than ever before. It has led them face the problem of role conflict as the traditional roles have not been taken over by men.

According to Shafi (2002) the working woman's problems are increased by the normative confusion which relates to role expectation. In joint family system, the parents in law still have expectations from daughter in law in the matter of looking after their household affairs or serving them. She does not receive much consideration for the additional income she brings home. The emergence of working woman as an earning member has, thus, created an abnormal situation because the expectations attached to woman's role in our society have not drastically changed.

**Challenges at the Workplace**

According to Census, 2011, the country’s total female workforce comprised of 149 million according to census data 2011 and 76.7% of them, across all age groups, are married. Married women have many role expectations by their family members as well as by the society on the whole. Married working women have to play dual roles at many times that lead to put stress and pressure on them. Unmarried working women have their own sets of challenges that either get lesser or larger by them being working. The modern roles of women have changed and they have many aids and appliances to lessen the household chores burden. But the roles of women have not changed at home though their working outside home has become acceptable. Therefore, working women in modern times face many challenges.

Women in airlines also face many challenges at workplace as well as home. Some of them have been accounted as follows:

**Work timings & working hours:** One finds a relationship between the working conditions and efficiency of the workers. Extensive and inflexible working hours may produce distress in family domain. It may also lead to withdrawal from family responsibilities and affect adversely one and all in the family.

*Table No 1: Working hours*

Working hours	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
4-8 hrs	12	30
8-12 hrs	16	40
12-16 hrs	12	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

It is clearly found from the table above that majority of the respondents had to spend less than 12 hours at work. The flight attendants working in international airlines had working hours beyond 12 but did not exceed 16. The working hours did not involve the travelling time to and from home to their workplace. Therefore, it could be seen that women in airlines had long working hours.

**Travelling distance to workplace and mode of travelling:** Travelling to workplace consumes time of working women and also cuts on to their leisure and family time apart from what they spend at the workplace.

**Environment at Workplace:** Frideric and Ryan’s (2005) model proposes that there are different ways in which work-home interface may be affected. Individual’s perceptions of work, work environment, home role requirements and coping strategies may be useful to deal with dual role conflict. Work environment plays a very important role in working women’s life situations. The working of male and female colleagues together is a common sight in modern industrial establishments and offices. But this also gives rise to certain kind of problems to working women, e.g. unnecessary tensions, misunderstandings etc.

*Relationship with Male Colleagues:* Men and women work together in all the departments in an airline. The flight attendants also had to work with the male colleagues during flights. The pilots were mostly men and also most of the people at the airport back office were men. Thus, there was frequent interaction amongst men and women.

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*Relationship with Seniors:* All the airport managers at Jammu airport were male except one female. The respondents shared that their relations with managers were good and satisfactory. However, 2.5% said that their managers were bossy and adamant at times. The female manager was said to be more approachable and they could openly talk to her regarding issues at home and leaves required. The flight attendants also had some issues with their seniors during the flights as well as in the offices. The senior crew members made them work more on the flights and also made them do the jobs they did not like, such as cleaning the lavatories (aircraft washrooms) and attend passenger calls. The managers in the offices were cooperative with them but they could not get leaves and other work done with ease at times.

*Lack of Resting Areas:* No separate resting space was observed for the employees in general or women employees in particular were found at the Jammu airport. The respondents also shared that they did not have any separate eating space for them and had to take their meals in the offices on the computer tables.

*Lack of Refreshments:* As the airport terminals have eating outlets, there was found no dearth of food available to the staff at airport as well. But, there were no separate tea/coffee made available to the staff by the airlines in their offices. Also, the ground staff had to take cold meals that they had brought from home. The flight attendants got their meals and refreshments in the aircrafts, but sometime had to eat whatever was left after serving passengers. Therefore, they had to compromise with the quality of meals they got to eat.

During fieldwork it was found that, though working in airlines seemed to be a glamorous profession to the society in general, but lack of facilities at the workplace made women to talk in terms of health problems also.

**Challenge with the Nature of Work:** The roles and responsibilities of ground staff and flight attendants are different from each other; therefore, the challenges for both have been accounted separately.

*Challenges at Work for Women Working as Ground Staff:* Women working as ground staff at the Jammu airport reported to face many challenges with the nature of work they did. Some of them included,

- They had to keep standing for hours together in the formal shoes which were often uncomfortable and became reason for feet and backache.
- The technical information at work sometimes overloaded their minds which lead to stress and fatigue. They had to use various security machines at the airport that required a good amount of knowledge.
- The passenger handling in case of delays and flight cancellations was reported to be a trouble. They had to handle shouting people at them, for no mistake of theirs.
- Working on computers systems for long time made them tired during working hours. It affected their performance after going to home from work. They felt tired to cook dinner and attending family members including their children.
- Because of too much work, there was either very less or no leisure time at all at the workplace. It was revealed through fieldwork that these women had to take meals very quickly in order to get back to work as soon as possible and kept doing different type of office work during free time, if any.

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*Challenges for Women Working as Flight Attendants:* Women working as flight attendants have their own set of issues and challenges at work due to the type of work they do. Some of them as reported by the respondents under the study have been listed below:

- Early morning and late night flights were the problems for these women that led to lack of sleep and anxiety.
- Communicating flight delays with onboard passengers and then handling their anger was also one of the major problems faced by women in this profession. Many a times the passengers got angry on the flight attendants for the delays or any other problems in flight and these women had to take their irk because they are taught to manage their emotions. It causes many behavioural and psychological problems in these women.
- Too many passengers to be served by too few flight attendants during the flight which does not give them time to take their meals sometimes. This also show that flight attendants have too much of workload that does not let them rest or eat properly during work in the flights
- Pulling heavy meal and service trolleys that lead to backache. Many of the respondents told that physical strength is needed to be efficient in this profession. These women are expected to meals and drinks trolleys which puts stress on their bodies and in long run may make them sick
- Fights and clashes amongst the crew members on a flight were also reported by one of the international flight attendant under the study. She shared that flight attendants have to fly with new set of colleagues almost on every flight that lead to lack of mutual understandings and ego clashes sometimes.
- Working through long flights with make up on eyes and face made them tired and irritated. Applying make-up and remaining presentable at work has become a norm in many of the occupations. It also depends on the choice of an individual whether to apply make-up or not. But in this profession, the flight attendants are not allowed to compromise with the make-up standards set appropriate by the airlines. It becomes problematic for them to work for long hours and early morning or night flights with make-up. It also affects their skin health causing acne, pimples and pigmentation.

**Discrimination at Workplace:** The principle of non-discrimination has been established in a number of International labour organisation conventions. Thus, the Discrimination convention which was adopted by the International labour conference in 1958, lays down the principle of non-discrimination in employment and occupation on the ground, among others of sex. The employers, nowadays, are not adopting discriminating policies for assigning tasks, except in some special cases (e.g. pregnant women). Especially in white collar world and service sector, there is no sex discrimination in assignment of tasks. Women are however refrained from doing some works such as lifting heavy weight, working in sun etc. Women had softer skills and were more effective in dealing with unruly passengers. They said that women in airlines were treated to be more effective than their men counterparts, but men were more efficient at performing heavier tasks, such as ramp duty (aircraft handling at the parking bay) and baggage handling.

**Table No 2: Discrimination at work faced by respondents**

Discrimination at work	Number of respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	4	10
No	36	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

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Table No.2 given above shows that 90% of the respondents did not feel discriminated in case of assignment of tasks, in fact women worked at all allocations along with men at the airport. Therefore, the duties in airlines are allotted independent of the gender of the employees; however an internalised structure could be seen which made certain duties more suitable for women and others for men.

**Job Security:** Job security is one of the issues related to work. Working women in airlines face the problem of job security. It was found during fieldwork through the interviews that employees of an airline are not sure of their duration of working in it. The flight attendants as well as ground staff women under the present study shared that there was no job security for them as they could be asked to resign anytime if the performance goes down.

**Maintaining physical appearance and wearing uniform:** Women in airlines have to wear uniform during work. The uniforms are not optional but compulsory and strict in adherence. It was found during the fieldwork that all the women working as ground staff at the Jammu airport wear uniform. Also the flight attendants have to be in uniforms throughout the working time. Only a few women, out of total 20 ground staffs under study, travelled in their own vehicles and rest availed public transport for coming to the workplace. One of the respondents shared that the uniforms in airlines are western and are mostly of bright colours that do not go with routine environment of public transport of a small city like that of Jammu.

The flight attendants got the facility of pick up and drop from the airlines and hence shared no problem in travelling to the workplace in uniform. However, there were incidences shared of being looked upon by people sometimes in their residential localities and at the airports as if they belong to a different world.

**Health Issues:** Working women go through stress and disturbances in life. Because of lack of time for themselves in order to maintain a balance between family and work life, they go through physical as well as mental sufferings. Women working in airlines are vulnerable to certain type of physical problems because of the nature of work they do. Some of them include backache, stress, anxiety, cervical pain, problems in conceiving child and many others.

### CONCLUSION

The present research paper has discussed the problems and challenges faced by women working as cabin crew. It is based on primary data mainly and looks into several domains of challenges faced by working women in commercial airlines in specific as well as working women in general. It has discussed role conflict faced by women as well as several challenges at work such as working hours, work timings, uniform related issues, office environment, health issues due to nature of job and many more. Therefore, the present research paper is significant as it brings up the issues faced by women in service industry where they are objectified.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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