

## Objectification of Women Flight Attendants: Ways and Effects

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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 different areas where women flight attendants are directly or indirectly objectified and the issues they face because of this.

**Keywords:** Working Women, Flight Attendants, Objectification, Society

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. Many of the feminist thinkers have undertaken studies on objectification of body and one of the works, 'Feminity and Domination' by Sandra Bartky has been used for appropriate understanding of the concept in the present study. Women in our society are more identified and associated with their bodies than are men, and, to a greater extent than men, they are valued for how they look. In order to gain social acceptability, women are under constant pressure to correct their bodies and appearance more generally, and make them conform to the ideals of feminine appearance of their time, the so-called 'norms of feminine appearance'. Some feminists have argued that, in being preoccupied with their looks, women treat themselves as things to be decorated and gazed upon.

Sandra Bartky (1990) in her work 'Feminity and Domination' uses the objectification that results from women's preoccupation with their appearance. She argues that women in patriarchal societies undergo a kind of fragmentation by being too closely identified with their bodies. All the focus is placed on a woman's body in such a manner that her mind or personality is not adequately recognised. According to her, objectification involves two persons, one who objectifies and other who is objectified. However, objectifier and objectified could be the same person. Women in patriarchal societies feel constantly watched by men, much like the prisoners in a prison and they feel the need to look pleasing

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to them. Such an attitude is called as 'narcissism' which is defined by Bartky as the infatuation with one's bodily being.

In being narcissist, argues Bartky, women learn to see and treat themselves as objects to be decorated and gazed upon. She also talks about the disciplinary practices that produce a feminine body and practices through which women learn to see themselves as objects.

First of all, there are those practices that aim to produce body of a certain size and shape and women must conform to body ideal of their time. It requires women to subject their bodies to constant dieting, exercise etc. This is the reason women are more obsessed to dieting than men.

According to Bartky, the second category of these disciplinary practices aims to produce a feminine body that aim to control the body gestures, postures and movements. She holds that women are more restricted than men in the way they move. Women's movements are also restricted by their uncomfortable clothes and shoes.

The final category of these practices is that directed towards the display of woman's body as an ornamental surface. It demands that women must take care of their skin and make it soft, smooth, hairless and wrinkle-free; they must apply make-up to conceal their skin imperfections. Bartky reiterates that our culture demands the infantilisation of women's bodies and faces.

She argues that, the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body and objectifies it, is present everywhere but visible nowhere. The message that women should look more feminine as per the contemporary time is reinforced by parents, peer-groups, male partners and is also expressed in various ways through media. Therefore, women in constant preoccupation with appearance to be regarded as something natural and voluntary, it is something women have internalised. It is far from easy for them to escape this objectification.

In India, service sector has flourished in recent some years and work participation of women has also surged with an unprecedented rate into it. The interpersonal skills of human beings are the key to the work in service sector. Women are successful beings in service sector because of them being hospitable, patient, soft spoken and emotionally intelligent. The socialisation of women is done in such a manner that they become the softer and gentle gender in society. Today women could be seen working as radio announcers, receptionists, human resource managers, counsellors, motivators and in many such other work roles where softer and hospitable skills are required.

Gendered socialisation of women teaches them to behave in a particular manner so that they perform the expected roles in society. They are always told to speak softly, behave gently and generate their liking and disliking according to their future roles of wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Therefore, women have skills that are different than those of men and these are utilised in some professions in the modern times. Modernisation has given rise to changed modes of production and has also given rise to new professions. As a result of modernisation, there is rise in globalisation and a concept of fading boundaries among different nations.

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Travel industry is amongst those which need the soft skills of its employees to attract more customers towards it. More specifically, aviation industry focuses too much on the needs and demands of its customers as it is one of the expensive modes of travel. Here comes into play the role of women working as receptionists, announcers, guest services agents and air hostess.

Women in airlines work at all the designations such as aircraft engineer, pilots, and technical staff, flight attendants, ground crew, and management personnel. They also work as security personnel, catering members, executive officers, marketing and human resource managers. All the designations have different sets of roles and responsibilities and this study has attempted to know the roles and responsibilities of women in airlines working as flight attendants and ground staff.

Women working in airlines are objectified by their employers. There is a deep importance of wearing appealing uniforms and shoes. They need to put on make-up and restrict their motions, gestures and movements according to what is taught to them. They are used as branding items by their employer airlines in order to sell more tickets and attract people's attention to fly with them.

The present research paper is based on field study and has made use of feminist perspective. Two types of sampling methods were used to identify and select the sample: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Using these methods 20 women flight attendants was chosen. Primary data was collected by using interview and interview schedules. The secondary data has been collected and referred from books, journals, articles, internet sources etc.

The main objective of this paper is to look into the issues faced by women working as air hostess in airlines where there looks, bodies, speech, gait, smile, gestures etc are used as objects of attracting/ fetching more customers to choose to fly with the employer. Service industry makes good use of women as objects and tries to reshape, resize, restructure the ways women look, speak or behave in order to match the expectations of their customers which in turn causes several problems to these women.

### ***Areas of Objectification of Women in Airlines:***

***Advertising:*** Right from the advertisement of airlines air hostesses are portrayed as a part of the airlines which passengers can own instead of depicting service as their secondary function in a flight. They are made to wear such revealing uniforms which look glamorous like models but hinder their functioning during emergency situations and even during regular flights while men crew get to wear proper uniforms. The uniforms designed for air hostesses often end up compromising their safety in the aircraft and their ability to discharge their duties in case of an emergency. The precise makeup they do is also often imposed upon them by the airlines they work in.

***Recruitment:*** The beginning point of objectification of women in the profession of air hostess can be seen in its recruitment process where main emphasis is given on age, height, weight, complexion, and other physical standards. This automatically leads to elimination of a larger section of women from entering this profession. This is further complemented by making them wear appealing western uniforms accompanied by high-heeled shoes and make-up.

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***Compulsory maintenance of 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. The uniforms varied from trousers, skirts and blazers to sarrees. Thus, this fact was found as a contrast that the working women in airlines have to work in formal uniforms that are mostly western unlike women in other professions.

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. The uniforms of the flight attendants differed from the ground staffs as the nature of duty was also different. Also, the make-up and discipline of the flight attendants appearance was observed to be more near to perfect.

The flight attendants said that they had to spend a considerable portion of their salary into purchasing make-up items as airlines do not pay them extra for it. The flight attendants' glamorous appearances are sometimes misunderstood by people and cause mental distress to them, said one of the respondents. She shared that one of the passengers called her 'beauty with no brains', where another called her colleague to be a 'glorified mistress'.

Working inside the aircraft with prim and proper uniform, hair and make-up becomes difficult when we do not have disciplined people around", said another respondent. She said that it is because of this glamorous uniform that simple girls look glamorous attendants and people often choose their flights according to this glamour. It is because of this uniform that they had to hear bad comments at times and people wanted to click their pictures some other times. They said that they liked their uniform and loved the work but it is sometimes due to certain experiences with people from different walks of life that the purpose of uniform is undermined.

Hoshchild (2012) in his book, '*The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*', says that airlines use the feminine features of flight attendants and the attractive uniforms in order to chase business. But this causes deep impression on women's mind that how people in public sphere treat her. Also airlines teach people to manage their feelings towards how they want to act and how they actually do.

***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.

One of the studies '*Reproductive Disorders and Pregnancy Outcomes Among Female Flight Attendants*' by L. Lauria, T.J. Ballard, M. Caldora, C. Mazzanti and A. Verdecchia, shows that flight attendants are exposed to various kinds of physical, chemical and psychological factors associated with the type of activity and work they do. The results of this study show that there are problems of fertility and menstrual disorders were found to be frequent amongst flight attendants as compared to women working in other occupations.

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Another study namely 'Job Stress Among Female Flight Attendants' by MacDonald, Deddens, Grajewski, Whelan & Hurrell (2003) points out that there is paucity in information about job stress among flight attendants. It has also shown that long flights, extended working hours and lack of sleep lead to accumulation of stress among women working as flight attendants.

In the study 'Emotional Labour and Sexual Difference in Airline Industry' by Taylor & Tyler (2000), women are expected to do more the 'emotional labour' that women are supposed to possess by virtue of their sexual difference with that of masculinity. It causes psychological pressure on women in airline industry. Because of erratic work schedules and timings there is an effect upon biological rhythm of these women. Their eating and sleeping timings keep on getting disturbed so often that they lose appetite and sleep.

Flight attendants need to pull heavy meal trolleys and some luggage also at times wearing high heels that causes back pain. Also they have to work on computer with heavy eye make-up where they cannot even rub their eyes. The respondents shared that they are always worried about their make-up, nails, hair and uniform more than their health and it often leads to stress, tiredness, anxiety, back pain, cervical pain and many more such issues.

### CONCLUSION

In the above research paper the concept of objectification has been discussed and its relevance in the profession of air hostess has also been given based on the primary data. Air hostess are objectified by the employer airlines as per their marketing requirements in order to fetch more customers to fly with them. Beauty, speaking skills, dressing and other parameters are defined as per the comfort and imagination of men in patriarchal society and same is reflected in this profession under consideration of study. It is therefore concluded that women working as air hostess are seen and used as objects in airlines and it causes several problems to them in their workplace, social life as well as health.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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