

Burdens Behind the Wings: Gendered Challenges of Female Cabin Crew in Nepal

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Abstract

This study examines the labor dynamics of female cabin crew members in Nepal's aviation industry. Although the occupation is often portrayed as glamorous and empowering, such representations often obscure the structural conditions shaping women's work in a developing economy like Nepal. Drawing on feminist perspectives, the study provides a qualitative thematic interpretation of existing scholarship on cabin crew labor. Five key themes emerge: gendered professional identity, emotional labor, aesthetic labor and bodily surveillance, work–family conflict, and career precarity. Findings suggest that emotional and aesthetic labor are disproportionately expected from air hostesses and are often culturally naturalized as feminine qualities rather than recognized as skilled work. Strict appearance standards, moral scrutiny, and short-term contractual employment contribute to insecure and often short-lived careers. Irregular and extended working hours further intensify work–family conflict, limiting women's capacity to balance professional and domestic responsibilities. While aviation employment in Nepal is symbolically associated with modernity and women's empowerment, it rarely ensures long-term economic security or stability. Instead, it tends to reproduce gender inequalities and generate psychological strain. Situating Nepal's aviation sector within broader feminist debates on service labor, the study highlights the need for gender-sensitive labor policies, institutional protection, and greater recognition of emotional labor in improving the working conditions of female cabin crew.

Keywords: airhostesses, emotional labor, aesthetic labor, feminist theory, aviation

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Introduction

The global aviation industry represents a combination of modern technology, service work, and progress. Within this industry, female cabin crew—often known as air hostesses—are

presented as symbols of success, empowerment, hospitality, elegance, and quality service. Such an image is widely used in airline company branding (Barry, 2007; Tyler & Abbott, 1998). This study argues that, despite these portrayals,

the profession does not necessarily provide sustainable material security, a balanced work–family life, or adequate psychosocial support. While the job appears prestigious and empowering, the lived experiences of female cabin crew reveal hidden gendered challenges shaped by emotional demands, sociocultural expectations, and job insecurity.

Feminist scholars argue that occupations largely dominated by women, especially in the service sector, are not gender-neutral (Adkins, 1995; Hochschild, 1983). Studies show that the work of flight attendants extends beyond safety responsibilities to include expectations regarding appearance, behaviour, and emotional expression. For instance, Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor, which explains situations in which workers must manage—or sometimes suppress—their genuine feelings to meet organizational expectations. Later studies demonstrate that emotional and aesthetic performance is not merely an additional aspect of the job but a mandatory qualification or requirement (Williams, 2003; Taylor & Tyler, 2000). In this sense, femininity itself becomes a form of labor that is carefully regulated and monitored within the airline industry.

These global perspectives are useful for analysing the situation of air hostesses working in Nepal. The domestic aviation sector has created new employment opportunities for women as cabin crew members. This profession is often viewed as a pathway to social mobility, financial independence, empowerment, and global exposure. Many young women aspire to become air hostesses because the occupation symbolizes success and modern identity. However, this positive image conceals several underlying tensions. Female cabin crew are expected to remain calm, friendly, and composed

despite long duty hours, physical and emotional exhaustion, and challenging interactions with passengers. Prolonged emotional regulation can lead to stress, burnout, and feelings of inauthenticity (Bolton, 2005).

In South Asian contexts, emotional labor is shaped not only by workplace rules but also by cultural values. Baruah and Patrick (2014) show that emotional performance is often interpreted as a moral duty linked to feminine respectability. Spiess (2005) highlighted the aesthetic labour on low-cost carriers is ethically problematic. Similarly, studies in Pakistan indicate that excessive emotional regulation, particularly “surface acting,” is strongly associated with emotional exhaustion (Butt et al., 2019). These findings suggest that the notion of empowerment within such professions is complex, as women are expected to display selfless and caring behaviour aligned with traditional gender roles.

Another important dimension of this work is aesthetic labor, which refers to organizational expectations regarding physical appearance. Research shows that airlines often prefer employees who conform to specific beauty standards, such as being young, slim, charming, and attractive (Tyler & Abbott, 1998; Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). In Global South contexts, these expectations are further shaped by cultural norms. For example, Ayuttacorn (2015), in a study conducted in Thailand, found that female cabin crew members often internalize these appearance standards as part of their self-worth. In South Asia, Bhattacharjya (2018) argues that such standards function as mechanisms of organizational control. This control over women’s appearance frequently extends into their personal lives, influencing decisions related to employment continuity after marriage, motherhood, and aging. In Nepal,

Tamang (2009) highlights that women working in highly visible professions such as aviation are often subject to social scrutiny and gossip. As a result, appearance becomes both a professional requirement and a source of social judgment.

Such an organizational framework creates a situation in which female cabin crew are required to balance two forms of responsibility: meeting organizational expectations while also fulfilling sociocultural and familial obligations. While their job requires them to project an attractive and modern image, society often judges them according to traditional, particularly patriarchal, notions of femininity. This “double burden” limits their autonomy and shapes their future opportunities. Studies conducted in Nepal conclude that social pressures, including expectations related to marriage and family, reduce the long-term benefits of such employment (European Transport Workers’ Federation [ETF], 2025).

Work–family conflict is another major challenge for air hostesses. Scholars frequently note that this tension arises when work and family responsibilities become difficult to balance (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Bhattacharjya, 2018). In the aviation industry, irregular schedules, extended duty hours, night shifts, and prolonged absences from home make achieving work–family balance particularly challenging. Studies show that women often continue to bear primary responsibility for household labor even when employed full-time (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). This “second shift” results in stress and feelings of guilt, especially in South Asian societies such as Nepal, where women are expected to prioritize family roles (Bhattacharjya, 2018; Butt et al., 2019).

The precarious nature of the job further intensifies this situation. Today, many service-

sector occupations are characterized by short-term contracts and limited employment benefits (Kalleberg, 2009), a trend also evident in Nepal’s aviation sector. Female cabin crew often leave the profession at a relatively young age—usually before the age of forty, frequently after marriage or during pregnancy. Such departures often occur without adequate savings, pensions, or long-term career alternatives. Prolonged unemployment may also contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Aryal, 2025). This situation reveals a clear gap between the symbolic image of empowerment and the actual economic security provided by the job.

Overall, existing scholarship highlights both shared patterns and regional differences. Theories of emotional and aesthetic labor explain the structural forces shaping the lives of female cabin crew, while studies from the Global South demonstrate how these experiences are influenced by local sociocultural norms and gendered expectations. However, Nepal’s aviation sector remains under-researched compared to other industries. This study addresses that gap by examining how gendered expectations, emotional labor, sociocultural values, and job insecurity shape the experiences of female cabin crew in Nepal.

This study is significant because it challenges the common assumption that employment in the aviation sector automatically empowers women or guarantees social success. By integrating feminist perspectives with Nepal’s specific cultural context, it demonstrates that empowerment is complex and often incomplete. The findings highlight the need for stronger labor protections, gender-sensitive workplace policies, and further research on emerging service-sector occupations. A deeper understanding of these issues can assist policymakers and organizations

in creating safer and more supportive working conditions for women in the aviation industry.

The objectives of this research are to examine how the work of female cabin crew in Nepal's aviation industry is structured through gendered emotional, aesthetic, and moral labor by synthesizing existing scholarship, and to analyse how cultural norms, work–family conflict, and precarious employment conditions shape women's professional experiences and constrain the long-term empowering potential of cabin crew employment in Nepal.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research approach grounded in interpretivist and feminist epistemology. The interpretivist approach assumes that reality is socially constructed and shaped by cultural meanings and power relations, making it appropriate for examining gendered labor experiences and representations in the aviation industry. Feminist epistemology further emphasizes analysing knowledge production through gendered power structures while highlighting women's lived experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Together, these perspectives enable a critical examination of how emotional labor, aesthetic labor, and the professional identities of female cabin crew are constructed within broader sociocultural and economic contexts.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Twenty academic sources were selected based on the following criteria:

- o Focus on gender, emotional labor, aesthetic labor, or service work
- o Relevance to aviation or comparable service industries
- o Inclusion of South Asian or Global South perspectives where available

- o Peer-reviewed or academically credible publications with citations

Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches in major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR. Keywords used in the search included combinations of “female cabin crew,” “air hostess,” “emotional labor,” “aesthetic labor,” “gender and aviation,” “service work,” and “aviation employment.” Boolean operators such as AND and OR were applied to refine search results. The search primarily focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and scholarly reports. The literature was selected and finalized through a funneling process. This involved categorizing studies thematically and progressively narrowing the focus from broader service-sector research to aviation-related scholarship. Seminal theoretical works (e.g., Hochschild, 1983) were included to provide a strong analytical foundation.

The review initially identified more than 100 studies on gendered service work, emotional labor, aesthetic labor, and neoliberal employment regimes. Through a funneling process involving thematic categorization, screening, contextual relevance assessment, and sectoral narrowing, the pool of studies was progressively reduced. Research was first grouped under broader service-sector scholarship, then narrowed to comparable hospitality and customer-facing industries, followed by aviation-specific studies, and finally filtered for the most relevant literature. The final 20 studies were selected based on theoretical contribution, contextual relevance, methodological rigor, and citation credibility. Exclusion occurred when thematic redundancy and theoretical saturation were reached, as suggested by Snyder (2019) and Booth et al. (2016).

Data were analysed using MAXQDA software, generating categories and themes following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). This process involved familiarization with the texts, coding recurring concepts, identifying overarching themes, and interpreting those themes in relation to gendered power structures. The analysis moved iteratively between individual studies and broader theoretical frameworks to generate interpretive insights. Through repeated reading and coding, five major themes emerged: the gendered construction of professional identity, emotional labor and exhaustion, aesthetic labor and bodily regulation, work–family conflict, and precarity and career temporality.

The feminist theoretical framework adopted in this study aligns with its qualitative, interpretive, and thematic review methodology. Feminist epistemology recognizes knowledge as situated and socially constructed, making it particularly suitable for analysing gendered labor experiences through secondary sources. Rather than seeking generalizable truths, this framework prioritizes meaning-making, power relations, and structural context.

By integrating feminist political economy with emotional and aesthetic labor theories, this study offers a holistic understanding of female cabin crew work as simultaneously emotional, embodied, cultural, and economic. This framework provides the conceptual foundation for analysing the literature, interpreting the findings, and critically engaging with narratives of empowerment within Nepal’s aviation industry.

To ensure rigor, the research process follows Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Inductive thematic coding was conducted in accordance with Braun and Clarke’s (2021) guidelines. Reflexive engagement with sources and transparent thematic development further strengthen analytical validity.

Rather than presenting primary empirical results, the findings highlight key recurring patterns identified across the analyzed studies. Through iterative thematic analysis, five interrelated themes were identified, explaining how gendered emotional and aesthetic labor operate within the structurally precarious and culturally regulated aviation sector of Nepal.

Five key recurring themes are summarized in Table 1. The work of cabin crew, particularly women in this role, forms an interconnected web of gendered and precarious demands shaping both professional and personal lives. Their professional identity is constructed around an idealized feminized service persona that emphasizes grace, attractiveness, and nurturing care. This identity is tightly regulated through strict aesthetic labor requirements governing appearance, makeup, body weight, age, and displays of femininity under continuous organizational surveillance.

This bodily discipline is inseparable from the intense emotional labor expected of cabin crew, who must constantly manage and sometimes suppress their own emotions to project warmth, patience, and composure in high-pressure environments and during difficult passenger interactions. Such demands frequently lead to emotional exhaustion, occupational burnout, and, in some cases, more severe mental health challenges.

These conditions further intensify work–family conflict. Irregular flight schedules, extended absences from home, and the “double

burden” of paid employment alongside unpaid domestic responsibilities strain personal relationships, generate trust issues, and expose women to social stigmatization associated with highly visible yet temporary occupations.

Underlying all these experiences is the extensive precarity of the career itself, characterized by short-term contracts, limited long-term security, inadequate employment

benefits, and a high risk of sudden unemployment. Employment discontinuity is often linked to appearance-related expectations, leaving many air hostesses facing uncertain futures and difficult career transitions after leaving the profession. Consequently, the occupation produces a cycle of embodied, emotional, and temporal vulnerability that extends far beyond its surface image of glamour.

Table 1

Thematic Overview of Findings

Themes	Analytical Focus	Key Supporting Studies
Gendered construction of Professional Identity	Construction of cabin crew as feminized service workers.	Adkins (1995); Barry (2007); Williams (2003); Bhattacharyajya (2018); Beneria et al., (2003); Garcia (2019), Kurtulmuşoğlu et al. (2018)
Emotional Labor and Exhaustion	Regulation of emotions and affective discipline.	Baruah & Patrick (2014); Butt et al. (2019); Bolton (2005); Hochschild (1983); Okabe (2020)
Aesthetic Labor and Bodily Regulation	Surveillance of appearance, beauty codes, Makeup protocols, age, and femininity	Tyler & Abbott (1998); Ayuttacorn (2015); Kapoor (2021); Spiess (2005)
Work-Family Conflict	Double burden of paid and unpaid labor, trust issues, and stigmatization.	Hochschild & Machung (1989); Tamang (2009); Moosa (2018); Greenhaus & Beutell (1985)
Precarity and Career Temporality	Short-term careers and insecure futures, low SSF plan, and fringe benefits. High risk of being stuck being unemployed after job termination.	Kalleberg (2009); Bhattacharyajya (2018); Seligson (2024); Mills (2006)

Note. Thematic Analysis of Existing Scholarship.

Gendered Construction of Professional Identity

A recurrent theme across the literature is the gendered construction of cabin crew identity, in which women are positioned less as aviation professionals and more as embodiments of care,

grace, and compliance. Barry (2007) argues that the historical formation of the “air hostess” role was explicitly designed around ideals of controlled femininity, a pattern that continues in contemporary airline branding.

In South Asian contexts, this feminized professional identity is further shaped by cultural norms and values. Bhattacharjya (2018) demonstrates that Indian female cabin crew are evaluated not only on job performance but also on moral comportment, reinforcing the idea that professionalism for women is inseparable from respectability. This aligns with Tamang's (2009) argument that women's public labor in Nepal is socially accepted only when it does not challenge patriarchal gender expectations. Collectively, the literature suggests that female cabin crew professionalism is symbolically feminized, limiting recognition of technical expertise and reinforcing gender hierarchies within aviation organizations (Kurtulmuşoğlu et al., 2018).

Emotional Labor as Gendered Obligation

Emotional labor emerges as a central analytical theme. Hochschild's (1983) discussion remains foundational, but studies from the Global South indicate that emotional labor is not only organizationally required but also culturally expected.

Baruah and Patrick (2014) found that Indian cabin crew experience emotional regulation as a moral responsibility closely tied to feminine self-control. Similarly, Butt et al. (2019) show that Pakistani female flight attendants who engage in sustained surface acting report higher levels of emotional exhaustion and a reduced quality of life.

Table 2

Forms and Consequences of Emotional Labor Identified in the Literature

Dimension	Description	Reported Consequences
Surface Acting	Suppressing true emotions to display friendliness, calmness, and cheerfulness.	Occupational Burnout, Stress.
Deep Acting	Internalizing required emotions	Identity strain, self-surveillance
Emotional Dissonance	Mismatch between felt and displayed emotions	Psychological stress, detachment

Note. Thematic Analysis of Existing Scholarship.

These findings indicate that emotional labor functions as a gendered obligation that is normalized through cultural narratives of feminine patience and care, thereby masking its psychological as well as social costs.

Aesthetic Labor and Bodily Surveillance

Aesthetic labor constitutes another major theme. These categories collectively represent how women's bodies are continuously monitored and disciplined within the profession. Tyler and Abbott (1998) describe aesthetic labor

as "looking right," but studies from the Global South reveal deeper layers of organizational and cultural control.

Ayuttacorn's (2015) study of Thai flight attendants conceptualizes aesthetic labor as an affective performance in which bodily compliance is closely linked to moral worth. Kapoor (2021) similarly discusses how Indian airlines enforce standards of youthfulness, slimness, and heterosexual femininity, effectively rendering women's careers temporally limited.

Table 3*Mechanisms of Aesthetic Control in Aviation Labor*

Mechanism	Organizational Function	Gendered Impact
Weight monitoring	Brand image maintenance	Body anxiety, self-discipline
Grooming standards	Corporate uniformity	Reinforcement of femininity norms
Age limits	Cost minimization	Early career exit for women

Note. Thematic Analysis of Existing Scholarship.

Roles that demand aesthetic appearance operate as a disciplinary regime that governs women's bodies and life trajectories. Such requirements reinforce precarity under the guise of professionalism.

Studies consistently highlight the double burden faced by female cabin crew, who must balance emotionally demanding work with unpaid domestic responsibilities. Hochschild and Machung's (1989) concept of the "second shift" is particularly relevant in South Asian and developing contexts, where domestic labor continues to be perceived primarily as women's responsibility.

Moosa (2018) found that irregular schedules and emotional fatigue strain family relationships, while Tamang (2009) emphasizes that women's employment in Nepal rarely leads to the redistribution of household labor. Work–family conflict, therefore, is not merely

an individual coping issue but a manifestation of structural gender inequality, intensified by cultural expectations that prioritize women's caregiving roles.

Precarity and Gendered Career Temporality

Precarity emerges as a defining feature of cabin crew employment in the Global South. Bhattacharjya (2018) and Kalleberg (2009) note that women's aviation careers are often short-lived and lack pensions, maternity benefits, or clear advancement pathways.

Seligson (2024) argues that aviation fails to provide "quality jobs" for women when emotional and aesthetic labor remain undervalued and insufficiently supported. The findings suggest that aviation offers symbolic mobility without corresponding material security, thereby reinforcing gendered vulnerability across the life course.

Table 4*Dimensions of Precarity in Female Cabin Crew Careers*

Dimension	Description	Long-Term Implications
Contractual insecurity	Short-term or renewable contracts	Financial instability
Career ceilings	Limited promotion opportunities	Early exit from the workforce
Post-career vulnerability	Lack of transferable skills, low confidence in switching professions.	Economic dependence, Unemployment

Note. Thematic Analysis of Existing Scholarship.

Taken together, the findings indicate that female cabin crew labor is structured through interlocking regimes of emotional discipline, aesthetic control, cultural surveillance, and economic insecurity. While aviation employment is often framed as empowering, the reviewed literature demonstrates that such empowerment is partial, conditional, and temporally limited.

Results and Discussion

This study examined female cabin crew in Nepal's aviation industry through an inductive thematic review of existing literature, identifying key recurring themes: emotional labor, aesthetic discipline, cultural norms, work–family conflict, and precarity. The findings collectively challenge dominant narratives that portray air hostesses as inherently empowered women or ideal role models associated with glamour and prestige. Instead, the study reveals a more complex reality in which symbolic empowerment coexists with structural vulnerability. The study is grounded in feminist theory, particularly the feminist political economy of labor (Cantillon et al., 2023), feminist theories of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), and feminist analyses of embodiment and respectability. Together, these perspectives provide a critical framework for understanding how female cabin crew work in Nepal's aviation industry is structured through gendered power relations, cultural norms, and economic precarity.

Feminist theory challenges the conventional economic assumption that labor markets operate as neutral or merit-based systems. Instead, it emphasizes that women's work has historically been undervalued, feminized, and rendered invisible, especially in service sectors where care, emotion, and appearance form integral parts of the labor process (Benería et al., 2003; Walby, 2009). Feminist scholars argue that women's

labor is often framed as a natural extension of femininity rather than as skilled professional work, enabling organizations to extract value while minimizing recognition and protection.

In the context of aviation, feminist theory helps interrogate why cabin crew work—despite involving technical competence and significant safety responsibilities—is predominantly defined through traits such as friendliness, patience, and attractiveness. This framing aligns with patriarchal constructions of femininity and reinforces gendered occupational hierarchies. Applying a feminist lens allows this study to move beyond surface narratives of empowerment and examine how gender operates as a structural organizing principle within aviation labor.

Perspectives from the feminist political economy of labor extend feminist analysis by situating women's work within broader economic and institutional structures. This approach critiques the interaction between capitalism and patriarchy in producing labor arrangements that rely on women's unpaid, underpaid, or emotionally intensive work (Fraser, 2016; Elson, 2012). From this viewpoint, employment opportunities that appear empowering may still reproduce inequality when characterized by insecurity, short career spans, and limited social protection.

Within Nepal's aviation industry, the feminist political economy framework explains how airlines benefit from women's emotional and aesthetic labor while providing limited institutional support and long-term security. Cabin crew employment is often contractual, temporally limited, and closely tied to age, appearance, and marital status. Feminist political economy, therefore, enables this study to interpret precarity not as an individual outcome but as a structural feature of gendered labor markets, particularly in Global South contexts.

Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labor remains central to feminist analyses of service work. Feminist scholars have expanded this framework by demonstrating that emotional labor is disproportionately assigned to women and culturally framed as a feminine disposition rather than as skilled labor requiring recognition and compensation. In this study, emotional labor theory is used to interpret findings related to emotional regulation, exhaustion, and burnout among female cabin crew. In South Asian contexts, emotional endurance is often culturally normalized as a moral and feminine obligation, intensifying women's vulnerability to emotional strain. Feminist theory highlights how such normalization obscures the psychological costs of emotional labor and reinforces gender inequality by individualizing distress rather than addressing organizational responsibility.

Feminist scholarship also emphasizes the central role of the body in women's labor experiences. Aesthetic labor theory, when interpreted through a feminist lens, reveals how women's bodies become sites of discipline, surveillance, and control (Tyler & Abbott, 1998). Appearance standards, grooming regulations, and age restrictions function not merely as professional requirements but as mechanisms that regulate femininity and reinforce heteronormative ideals. In Nepal's cultural context, where women's public visibility is closely associated with respectability, aesthetic labor intersects with moral surveillance. Feminist theory enables this study to analyse how women internalize and negotiate bodily discipline while remaining constrained by organizational and sociocultural expectations. This perspective is particularly important for understanding why women's aviation careers often remain short-lived and highly contingent.

Rethinking Empowerment in Feminized Aviation Work

The literature consistently portrays cabin crew work as a gateway to modernity, mobility, and social prestige. However, when examined through a feminist and Global South perspective, such apparent empowerment appears both conditional and fragile. The findings demonstrate that professional recognition for female cabin crew is frequently tied to their ability to embody culturally sanctioned femininity rather than to their technical competence or work experience.

This aligns with Bhattacharjya's (2018), Mills (2006) and Barry's (2007) arguments that aviation has historically relied on feminized service identities to mask labor exploitation. In the context of Nepal, where women's public mobility remains morally regulated (Tamang, 2009), cabin crew employment offers visibility but also intensifies scrutiny. Empowerment, therefore, emerges not as a stable outcome of employment but as a negotiated and temporary condition constrained by gendered expectations.

Emotional Labor as Invisible and Gender-Normalized Work

The prevalence of emotional labor highlights how deeply rooted gendered expectations are in women's experiences in aviation. While Hochschild's (1983) theory conceptualizes emotional labor as organizationally managed, studies from the Global South show that emotional endurance is culturally normalized as a feminine virtue. This normalization renders emotional labor largely invisible and undervalued.

The reviewed studies indicate that sustained surface acting leads to exhaustion, occupational burnout, and disengagement. Yet these consequences are often individualized rather than

recognized as structural problems (Butt et al., 2019; Baruah & Patrick, 2014; Okabe, 2020). In Nepal and similar contexts, women's emotional resilience is celebrated as professionalism, which obscures the psychological costs of constant affective regulation. This reinforces gender inequality by transforming emotional strain into a personal coping issue rather than a workplace concern requiring institutional intervention.

Aesthetic Labor, Bodily Discipline, and Gendered Control

A key finding is that aesthetic labor among air hostesses operates as a central mechanism of gendered control. Many airlines justify grooming standards and appearance requirements as part of their branding strategies. However, the literature demonstrates that such practices disproportionately constrain women's bodies and career trajectories. These standards increase stress for air hostesses, who must regulate body weight and maintain appearance despite irregular food access and unpredictable rest schedules.

This aligns with Ayuttacorn's (2015) concept of affective performance, which describes how women internalize bodily discipline while exercising limited agency within organizational constraints. In South Asian contexts, aesthetic regulation extends beyond appearance to include age, marital status, and sexuality (Kapoor, 2021; Bhattacharjya, 2018). Such enforced surveillance contributes to early job termination and reinforces the patriarchal perception of women's labor as temporary and replaceable.

In Nepal, where patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded, aesthetic labor intersects strongly with cultural and moral surveillance. This further limits women's autonomy and restricts their freedom to choose and sustain careers in aviation. Thus, beauty standards and

bodily surveillance in cabin crew work cannot be understood merely as corporate policy; they must be analysed as part of a broader gendered governance system intertwined with sociocultural norms and values.

Work–Family Conflict and the Persistence of the Double Burden

The findings confirm that work–family conflict is not an incidental or isolated challenge; rather, it is embedded within a patriarchal sociocultural structure that imposes moral expectations regarding being at home on time, attending to family responsibilities, and so on. Irregular schedules, emotional suppression, and long absences from home intensify tensions between professional and domestic responsibilities. In some cases, this leads to trust issues and conflict between husband and wife.

This phenomenon is consistent with Hochschild and Machung's (1989) concept of the "second shift." The literature shows that women's participation in paid employment does not significantly alter expectations regarding unpaid care work. Given the persistent patriarchal structure in Nepal, women are still expected to reconcile demanding aviation schedules with unpaid family labor and caregiving roles. This contributes to stress, guilt, and eventual withdrawal from the workforce, which ultimately reinforces gendered labor segmentation and inequality.

Work–Family Conflict as Structural Gender Inequality

The findings of this study indicate that work–family conflict is not a peripheral issue for female cabin crew; rather, it is a mechanism through which gender inequality is reproduced in Nepal's aviation industry. Aviation work is often framed as a personal career choice that

requires adaptability, resilience, and individual responsibility. However, a feminist analysis reveals that the burden of balancing work and family falls disproportionately on women due to entrenched sociocultural norms that have long shaped gender roles.

The reviewed literature shows that female cabin crew are expected to demonstrate total professional availability—emotional, temporal, and physical—while simultaneously fulfilling socially prescribed family roles. This dual expectation produces chronic tension, emotional fatigue, and moral conflict. Unlike male workers, women are frequently judged not only on job performance but also on their ability to maintain family harmony and social respectability. This aligns with feminist political economy arguments that women’s paid labor is systematically subordinated to unpaid reproductive labor.

Women’s mobility and public presence remain morally regulated in Nepal, and work–family conflict is further intensified by this social surveillance. Long absences from home, night duties, and interactions with male colleagues and passengers are often subject to scrutiny, gossip, stigmatization, and familial concern. As a result, women internalize responsibility for managing conflict, frequently sacrificing rest, personal well-being, or career progression to maintain social acceptance. Importantly, work–family conflict contributes directly to career temporality and precarity. Many women exit aviation not due to a lack of competence or commitment, but because of the unsustainable strain of balancing professional demands with caregiving expectations. This pattern reinforces the gendered design of aviation careers as short-term and disposable for women, while also making airlines dependent on young, emotionally compliant labor.

From a feminist perspective, the normalization of work–family conflict obscures organizational accountability. Airlines benefit from women’s flexibility and emotional endurance while offering minimal structural support. These practices shift responsibility onto individual air hostesses and reinforce the myth that successful work–life balance is a matter of personal discipline rather than institutional change. Overall, work–family conflict emerges as a key site where symbolic empowerment unravels. Despite offering visibility and prestige, cabin crew employment fails to accommodate women’s enduring gendered psychosocial and cultural realities. Addressing this issue in aviation requires not only recognition of emotional and aesthetic labor but also systemic reforms that challenge traditional gendered divisions of labor within both workplaces and households.

Precarity and Gendered Career Temporality

Another prominent finding of this review is the temporary nature of careers among air hostesses. Precarity is not an unintended consequence but a structurally embedded feature of the aviation industry. Short-term contracts, limited promotion opportunities, and the absence of retirement benefits disproportionately affect women, whose employability is further constrained by age and marital status.

Seligson’s (2024) critique of the aviation sector’s failure to provide quality jobs for women resonates with this finding. Airlines benefit from women’s emotional and aesthetic labor but invest minimally in long-term career development. As a result, many women exit the industry with limited financial security and few alternative opportunities, increasing the likelihood of prolonged unemployment and vulnerability to psychological distress, aligning with Aryal’s (2025) findings. This phenomenon

reveals a gap between symbolic prestige and material outcomes for Nepali air hostesses.

Situating Nepal within Global South Aviation Scholarship

This study situates Nepal within a broader pattern of gendered aviation work shaped by neoliberal labor regimes and patriarchal norms. Although Nepal-specific research remains limited, parallels with India, Pakistan, Thailand, and other Global South contexts suggest that these dynamics are not isolated but systemic. Persistent gendered expectations, sociocultural norms, organizational demands, and surveillance mechanisms collectively contribute to job insecurity, inequality, and long-term dependency among air hostesses in Nepal.

Conclusion

This study examined female cabin crew labor in Nepal's aviation industry through the lens of gendered emotional and aesthetic labor, cultural norms, and precarity. Drawing on approximately 20 studies from Global South and South Asian contexts, the analysis demonstrates that work as an air hostess, while symbolically empowering, is structurally constrained by patriarchal, organizational, and economic forces.

The review concludes that female cabin crew labor is governed by deep-rooted patriarchal social structures, organizational demands, as well as social surveillance and cultural notions of respectability that limit long-term security and well-being. Emotional labor is normalized and internalized as a feminine disposition. Aesthetic labor protocols within the aviation sector regulate women's appearance, life choices, and emotional expression, thereby constraining their well-being and sustainable career trajectories. Together, these dynamics reveal a fundamental contradiction between the promise of empowerment through aviation

modernity and the realities of gendered labor exploitation.

This study recommends stronger labor regulations to reduce short-term contractual insecurity and ensure social security coverage for female cabin crew in Nepal. Airline companies should revise appearance-based and age-related employment criteria to prevent gender discrimination and recognize emotional labor through mental health support mechanisms. Structured career transition and reskilling programs are also necessary to support women after exiting aviation employment. Together, these measures would help transform symbolic empowerment into sustainable economic and professional security.

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