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## De-gendering the Occupation: Exploring Gender-based Career Challenges Experienced by Female Flight Attendants

### Mesleğin Cinsiyetini Azaltmak: Kadın Uçuş Görevlilerinin Yaşadığı Cinsiyete Dayalı Kariyer Zorluklarını Keşfetmek

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#### Abstract

Considering that flight attendant is one of the most gender-stereotyped jobs, this study aims to explore gender-based challenges experienced by female flight attendants throughout their careers. In order to reach the research objectives, an open-ended questionnaire is conducted to 90 flight attendants working in 4 airlines in Turkey. The findings of the study reveal that female flight attendants are experiencing several gender-based challenges, such as being subjected to strict make-up requirements, facing society's negative prejudice, confronting sexual harassment from passengers and colleagues, having trouble establishing authority, and dealing with difficulties associated with a woman-dominated workplace. The study especially reveals the psychological challenges female flight attendants face in the workplace and in their daily lives. The findings and the associated recommendations provided to society and the airline company management aim to create a psychologically and physiologically healthier working environment for female flight attendants and support their career advancement.

#### Keywords

Gender, Aesthetic Labour, Sexual Harassment, Female Flight Attendants, Healthy Workplace

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#### Öz

Kabin memurluğu cinsiyete ilişkin basmakalıp yargıların en çok görüldüğü mesleklerden biridir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, kadın kabin memurlarının meslek hayatları boyunca karşılaştıkları cinsiyete dayalı zorlukları keşfetmektir. Araştırma amaçlarına ulaşmak için Türkiye'de 4 havayolunda görev yapan 90 uçuş görevlisine açık uçlu

anket uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları, kadın kabin memurlarının zorunlu makyaj kurallarına tabi olma, toplumun olumsuz ön yargısıyla karşı karşıya kalma, yolcu ve meslektaşları tarafından cinsel tacize uğrama, yolcular üzerinde otorite kurma konusunda zorlanma ve kadın yoğunluklu bir ortamda çalışma ile ilgili çeşitli zorluklar yaşadıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle, bu çalışma, kadın kabin memurlarının çalışma yerinde ve günlük yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları psikolojik zorlukları ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma bulgularına dayanarak geliştirilen öneriler, kadın kabin memurları için daha psikolojik ve fizyolojik olarak daha sağlıklı bir çalışma ortamı yaratmayı ve onların mesleki ilerlemelerine destek olmayı amaçlamaktadır.

### **Anahtar Kelimeler**

Cinsiyet, Estetik Emek, Cinsel Taciz, Kadın Uçuş Görevlileri, Sağlıklı İşyeri

## **1. Introduction**

According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), flight attendants (cabin attendants, hostesses, steward/stewardess) are part of the flight crew, with numerous duties on board. They undergo extensive training involving emergency procedures such as evacuating aircraft, maintaining passenger safety during evacuations, operating emergency equipment, and administering first aid (Chung and Chung, 2009; ICAO, 2014). In addition to their safety roles, flight attendants are also responsible for providing food and beverage service to passengers, conducting duty-free sales on-board, and ensuring the aircraft cabin is clean and tidy.

The lifestyle and the daily routine of flight attendants are very different from that of other professions (Mumtaz, 2017), and their compelling working conditions result in various career challenges. The literature on flight attendants' career challenges mostly focuses on health-related problems; many are gender-independent. In other words, they are both experienced by male and female flight attendants. Considering that the majority of flight attendants for most airlines are female (Datausa, 2020), this study aims to investigate particularly the gender-based career challenges experienced by female flight attendants and advise on solutions to alleviate these challenges.

## **2. Literature Review**

Flight attendants work under challenging conditions which involve irregular working hours, time-zone transitions, short resting periods, and high service delivery demands (Amner and Ryden, 2001; Banks et al., 2012; Shalla, 2004; Whitelegg, 2007). Because of the challenging conditions, they experience several health-related difficulties. First and foremost, flight attendants suffer from sleep disorders and fatigue (Akerstedt, 2003; Chung and Chung, 2009).

In addition, irregular working hours and traveling through different time zones interrupt flight attendants' sleep-wake cycle and disrupt their bodies' circadian rhythms, which act as a biological clock within the brain that internally tracks the time of the day (Pati et al., 2001). The interruption of the circadian rhythms results in serious health problems (Garbarino et al., 2002; Moosa, 2017). For instance, due to the desynchronization of circadian rhythms, flight attendants have higher salivary cortisol levels, which act as biochemical signs of stress, than the ground crew (Kwangwook et al., 2000). Circadian disruption is also considered a risk for cancer in women shift workers (Arendt, 2010 cited in Castro et al., 2015; Costa et al., 2010). Studies have found that female flight attendants have a higher prevalence of breast and skin cancer (e.g., Pukkala et al., 2012).

Moreover, because of their shift work schedules, flight attendants have irregular, unpredictable, and stressful meals, which lead to gastrointestinal complaints (Enck et al., 1995; Lindgren and Norbäck, 2005; McNeely et al., 2014; Sveinsdottir et al., 2007). Furthermore, with constant exposure to the cabin environment, flight attendants are more likely to have cardiovascular diseases (Fujino et al., 2006). Another job-related health problem experienced by flight attendants is the exposure to physical stress due to awkward postures while pushing and pulling the meal and beverage trolleys along the aircraft aisles (Schaub et al., 2007). Also, flight attendants are exposed to an increased risk of injury because of working in a moving aircraft (Agampodi et al., 2009). Other health problems

experienced by flight attendants are anxiety, depression, alcohol abuse, peripheral arterial disease, sinusitis, foot surgery, infertility, and various perinatal problems (McNeely et al., 2018).

Besides the health-related challenges, flight attendants' irregular work schedules and high-demanding workloads inevitably cause them to experience work-family conflicts (Moosa, 2017). Especially female flight attendants face work-family conflict pressures more than their male colleagues as they are mostly unable to play their full family roles as mothers and spouses (Chung and Chung, 2009; Lee et al., 2015). The consequent work-family conflicts result in higher work-related stress levels, depression, and burnout among flight attendants (Chang and Chiu, 2009; Chen and Chen, 2012; Frone, 2003; Moosa, 2017).

The role conflict theory can partially explain the reason for work-family conflicts. This theory suggests that when a woman is expected to play multiple roles, such as wife, mother, and employee, it can lead to tension and stress when attempting to balance these roles (Boles, Wood, and Johnson, 2003; Voydanoff, 2005). The role conflict theory is rooted in the expectations of stereotypical gender roles. Stereotypes are characteristics ascribed to individuals based on their association with a social group (Dickman and Eagly, 2000). Stereotypical gender roles are defined by beliefs about the characteristics of women and men (Eagly, 1984). In numerous cultures, women are expected to serve as primary caregivers for children and manage household chores (Eagly, 1984). They generally receive less support from their partners or families regarding household and childcare responsibilities. This can make it challenging to balance work and family obligations, leading to stress and burnout.

In addition to the abovementioned challenges, flight attendants experience physical and emotional exhaustion because of passengers' high service delivery demands (Ng et al., 2011). They serve tens of passengers on board with varying requests in a physically challenging space for long hours (Chen and Chen, 2012). Moreover, flight attendants are expected to perform "emotional labor", which is defined as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display that is sold for a wage" (Hochschild, 1983, p.7). They have a high level of contact with airline customers, and their emotional expressions can significantly affect the assessment of in-flight service quality, passenger satisfaction, and passenger loyalty (Barger and Grandey, 2006; Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2001; Wilk and Moynihan, 2005). Therefore, flight attendants are required to suppress their feelings and control their behavior and emotional expressions (Hochschild, 1983). Continuous maintenance of courteous service to passengers and emotional labor requirements causes flight attendants to experience high stress and emotional exhaustion (Fu, 2013; Ng et al., 2011; Tsaour and Tang, 2013).

Flight attendants are also required to conform to the "aesthetic labor" demands of their companies. Aesthetic labor is defined as hiring employees based on their looks (Nickson et al., 2001). Most airlines have hired only young, attractive, charming, physically fit, well-groomed, and unmarried women as flight attendants (Barry, 2007; Sangster and Smith, 2016) to attract customers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007), improve their products (Biswas, 2009), differentiate their services from competitors (Spiess and Waring, 2005), and consequently enhance their competitive advantages (Warhurst et al., 2000). The companies have expected flight attendants to act as brand enhancers or walking billboards (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009) and have required them to make a long-term commitment to aesthetic labor requirements such as weight management and dieting (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Sangster and Smith, 2016; Shilling, 1993 as cited in Tsaour and Tang, 2013). The requirements of aesthetic labor have created additional challenges for flight attendants, such as being stressed and burdened (Tsaour and Tang, 2013). Although many airlines have relaxed rules on flight attendants' appearance in recent years, several companies still require female flight attendants to conform to strict aesthetic labor requirements (NBCNews, 2019; Topham, 2019).

Body work theory offers an explanation for the stress experienced by cabin attendants as a result of performing emotional and aesthetic labor. Body work refers to labor that involves the manipulation of one's own body in order to meet the requirements of a particular job (Gimlin, 2007). Flight attendants are often required to dress a certain way and maintain a certain appearance, which can have negative consequences on their physical and emotional well-being. Objectification theory can also provide valuable insights into the difficulties faced in performing aesthetic labor. According to objectification theory, women are often viewed and treated as objects rather than human beings (Fredrickson and

Roberts, 1997; Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011). The strict make-up and appearance standards imposed on female cabin attendants are interpreted as an illustration of this objectification, whereby women are predominantly valued for their physical attributes and are expected to comply with restrictive beauty ideals to be deemed acceptable (Ayuttacorn, 2016). It should also be noted that the occupation of female flight attendants is often associated with traditionally feminine traits, and the expectation that they wear make-up and conform to specific appearance guidelines may be viewed as an extension of stereotypical gender roles (Hochschild, 1983; Tyler & Hancock, 2001).

A crucial career challenge experienced by female flight attendants has been sexual harassment and abuse. The surveys conducted on flight attendants have revealed that they have been facing sexual harassment from passengers and their co-workers (EOC, 2014; TWU, 2019). Sexual harassment is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual’s employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual’s work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment” (EEOC, 2020). Examples of sexual harassment involve but are not limited to staring, leering, or unwelcome touching of a person’s body, unwanted invitations or subtle pressure to go out on dates or requests for sex, remarks or questions about a person’s clothing, body, or sexual activities (Humanrights, 2020). Since the beginning of commercial aviation, many airlines have used female flight attendants’ gender and sexuality in their advertisements and marketing slogans to attract especially male business passengers (Lessor, 1984 as cited in Ren, 2017; Noon and Blyton, 1997 as cited in Pilcher, 2007; Wolkowitz, 2006). Some companies have even used stripping hostesses in advertisements (Whitelegg, 2007, p. 51 as cited in Lokenauth, 2018). The studies have argued that using female flight attendants’ bodies as symbols of beauty and sex appeal in the advertisements with substantial sexual implications has triggered sexual harassment and abuse towards them (e.g., Bates, 2017; Bullock, 2018; Lokenauth, 2018; Schneider, 2010).

Sexual harassment is a type of power and control that stems from gender-based inequality (EIGE, n.d.). Female flight attendants may be subjected to sexual harassment by passengers and colleagues because of their perceived vulnerability and lack of power in a male-dominated industry. Furthermore, in line with the objectification theory, the notion that a female cabin attendant is an object may result in sexual harassment by individuals who view her as an object to fulfill their own gratification (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Dailymail, 2014).

To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first paper that particularly focuses on the gender-based career challenges experienced by female flight attendants. Moreover, although non-academic studies (e.g., TWU, 2019) have revealed that a crucial career challenge experienced by the female cabin crew is sexual harassment, there have not been any academic studies addressing this issue. Considering the aforementioned gaps in the literature, this study comprehensively investigates female flight attendants’ gender-based career challenges and gives suggestions to society and airline company management to create a healthier working environment for female flight attendants and support their career advancement.

### 3. Methodology

In order to reach the research objectives, an open-ended questionnaire is conducted to 90 flight attendants working in 4 airlines in Turkey. Open-ended questions are useful in exploratory research and enable respondents to openly express their opinions and feelings without restricting responses to predefined answers (Malhotra, 2006). The questions ask respondents about the gender-based career challenges they have experienced through their careers and their suggestions to the companies, authorities, and the community to overcome these challenges. The participants are also asked whether they believe the job is a female job and their opinions on male flight attendants. The questionnaire is distributed through LinkedIn, a professional social networking platform, between May 2021 – June 2021, with a snowball technique. Ethical approval is obtained from the ethics board of the university to which the author was affiliated. The demographic details of the participants can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Category	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Marital status</b>			
	Single	60	66,7%
	Married	30	33,3%
<b>Child status</b>			
	Does not have children	79	87,8%
	Has children	11	12,2%
<b>Age</b>			
	18-24	15	16,7%
	25-30	39	43,3%
	31-36	23	25,6%
	37-42	8	8,9%
	43-48	4	4,4%
	49-54	1	1,1%
<b>Work Experience as a Flight Attendant</b>			
	0-1 year	20	22,2%
	2-5 years	35	38,9%
	6-10 years	19	21,1%
	11-15 years	10	11,1%
	16 years and more	6	6,7%

Content and discourse analyses are conducted on the data collected from the participants. Content analysis aims to detect the presence of certain words or concepts within texts, whereas discourse analysis focuses on word meanings and metaphors and analyses the naturally occurring language to reveal the hidden meanings and values behind the words (Krippendorff, 2004; Potter, 2004). Content and discourse analyses were carried out using manual coding as a technique. This involves a repetitive process of reviewing the data, assigning codes to specific sections, conducting multiple cycles of coding, organizing codes into themes, and drawing conclusions that contribute to the final research outcomes. (Maher et al., 2018).

## 4. Analysis of the Results

All participants, regardless of age, marital status, parental status, or experience, shared common themes without any discernible differences across demographics. The findings are grouped under two themes: i) Gender-based career challenges experienced by female flight attendants and ii) Suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

### 4.1. Gender-Based Career Challenges

#### 4.1.1. Strict Make-Up and Appearance Requirements

The participants have stated that a crucial gender-based challenge in their careers is the strict make-up and cosmetics requirements imposed by the companies, which results in various health problems and exhaustion among flight attendants. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

*“Being presentable can be very tiring. Waking up at 4 a.m. and struggling to look perfect by doing your hair and make-up, all of which harm your skin.” Participant 31*

*"I want to cry when I have to wake up in the middle of the night to do my hair and make-up. I can't cry because then I'm going to be late. I have to use hairspray to look better, but I have eczema on the scalp, and my allergy is very intense!" Participant 41 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

In addition, the participants have complained that they are treated unequally compared to male flight attendants in terms of physical appearance requirements. The sample statements of the respondents reveal the finding:

*"We always have to be more well-groomed than male flight attendants. More detailed personal care is required from us." Participant 3*

*"As a female flight attendant, I need to spend considerable time on my self-care. Even staying at a hotel during layovers, it may be necessary to put on a little make-up while going to breakfast, but this is not the case for male flight attendants." Participant 39*

*"We are not equal to men in being well-groomed. Having white hair is acceptable in men, but not in women." Participant 74 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

#### **4.1.2. The Society's Negative Prejudice**

Another significant gender-based career challenge highlighted by the participants has been society's negative prejudice towards female flight attendants. As stated by the participants:

*"Unfortunately, it is a fact that the society's perception towards women flight attendants in our country is not very positive." (Participant 66)*

*"It is very challenging to work in this profession because the perspective towards female flight attendants in our country is unpleasant." (Participant 12) (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

The statements of the participants have revealed the reasons behind the negative prejudice towards female flight attendants. Accordingly, there is a common belief that a flight attendant cannot be a good wife or a good mom because of her working conditions, including irregular working hours, overnight stays, and other necessities of the job. The sample statements are as follows:

*"Society's perception of the profession is negative due to our irregular working hours." Participant 19*

*"I wish that society did not have a negative perception of our occupation and did not label female flight attendants as 'shameless'. We indeed have irregular working hours, travel to different places, and stay at various hotels in other countries with male cockpit and cabin crew members. But we do this job to earn money. There are many female employees in the aviation industry who are married and who have children." Participant 39*

*"The perception of the profession is negative in Turkey. Some women say that they do not want their sons to get married to hostesses. Some people believe that we earn money by wearing skirts. They say we are sinful because we are serving alcohol on board" Participant 11 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

According to the statements of the participants, another reason for society's negative prejudice towards female flight attendants is the assumption that female flight attendants are likely to engage in extramarital affairs because of their working conditions. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

*"People believe that flight attendants and pilots are having secret love affairs. This belief puts stress on us." Participant 57*

*"Unfortunately, in Turkey, because of our irregular working hours, because we are away from home and stay at different hotels and in different places, people see us as 'easy women'. They believe we are not the ones to have a serious relationship or to get married because we are not trustworthy." Participant 17 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

Moreover, participants have stated that because the focus is always on flight attendants' appearance, other vital necessities of the job are undervalued by society. They have complained

that people do not know and understand their job's importance and do not respect female flight attendants. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

"Companies give too much importance to the flight attendants' physical appearance, and this overshadows the actual necessities of the job." Participant 46

"Flight attendants are confused with models." Participant 63

"Although it is a profession that requires intensive training, flight attendants are seen as sexual objects in our country. And some companies reinforce this perception." Participant 40 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

### 4.1.3. Sexual Harassment

A remarkable career challenge mentioned by the participants is that they have been facing sexual harassment from passengers and male colleagues. As stated by the participants:

"We have been exposed to flirty gaze and behavior of the cockpit crew and passengers." Participant 8

"I have encountered verbal sexual harassment several times throughout my professional life. Unfortunately, society has a sex-based attitude towards female flight attendants, and it never changes." Participant 9 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, some participants have stated that they are having difficulty controlling unruly passengers because of their gender. As expressed by the participants:

"Because I am a woman, some passengers do not take my instructions seriously. That makes my job more difficult." Participant 75

"Because we are women, our instructions are ignored by some passengers." Participant 77 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

### 4.1.4. Woman-Dominated Workplace

Moreover, some participants have highlighted the difficulty of working in a woman-dominated workplace. Most flight attendants believe that working with female flight attendants is more challenging than working with male ones. The reasons listed are due to women having difficulty managing their emotions compared to men. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

"I think working in a woman-dominated environment is extremely difficult. Having too many women working together creates competition. Also, if you are an attractive woman, the work can sometimes become unbearable. Women are jealous of each other and can harm each other more than men. That is why I think the number of male flight attendants should increase. For me, it has always been more fun to work with male flight attendants." Participant 9

"It is easier to work with men. By nature, women experience more hormonal changes, and they can get stressed more quickly than men. Having a man in flight reduces the stress level of the flight. Of course, there are a lot of friendly and sweet female flight attendants, but I've not flown with a bad male flight attendant before." Participant 85 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

### 4.1.5. Balancing Family-Work Life

Furthermore, some participants have admitted that they have difficulty balancing family-work life, especially after becoming mothers. As stated by the participants:

*"The flight schedule of flight attendants is fatal. It is impossible to allocate time for family and friends. While this may not be a problem for the male flight attendants, it is a big challenge for women who want to have family and kids."* Participant 82

*"Working in different time zones creates difficulties, especially for married female flight attendants, in terms of balancing work-home life. Successive layovers can result in excessive tiredness, which can damage family life."* Participant 90 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

Lastly, some respondents have stressed the difficulty they face while working during their periods. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

*"The first day of the period is physically tiring me every time."* Participant 3

*"I have very heavy and painful periods, and I need to go to the toilet often because of the pressure in the cabin during the flight. That makes the job very difficult." Participant 8 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

## 4.2. Suggestions to Overcome Gender-Based Career Challenges

The participants' suggestions to overcome gender-based career challenges are grouped under the following headings:

### 4.2.1. Informing Society About the Actual Responsibilities of Flight Attendants

The participants have stated that informing society about the responsibilities of flight attendants and their actual reason for being on board would help people better understand the job's importance and appreciate it. Consequently, that would allow changing the negative image of the profession. As stated by the participants:

*"The society should be explained what this profession is about. That would change the perception of female flight attendants." Participant 81*

*"To change the perception of a flight attendant, I think society should be informed well. Because, contrary to popular belief, several qualifications are required to become a flight attendant, such as being able to speak at least one foreign language and having a university degree." Participant 63*

*"We are trained to keep people safe and manage emergencies. I wish the community is aware of our reason for being on board." Participant 85 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

### 4.2.2. Reducing the Physical Appearance Requirements for Flight Attendants

In addition, the participants have suggested that the companies should reduce physical appearance requirements, and female flight attendants should be treated equally with male flight attendants in terms of these requirements. That would help to reduce the negative health issues associated with this obligation. The sample statements of the participants are as follows:

*"For the sake of equality, companies should reduce the extra make-up and appearance burden on women flight attendants. While men just shave and go out, women are obliged to do their hair in a standard style, apply certain color nail polish and make-up, wear high-heels and specified colored tights, etc. Besides, they have the same responsibility as men." Participant 8*

*"I think companies should be more understanding, and our appearance should not be more important than our health." Participant 61 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

The participants have also expressed that reducing the physical appearance requirements would help overcome the profession's negative image in the eyes of society. As stated by the participants:

*"Companies are strengthening the negative perception towards flight attendants even more by overcontrolling their appearance. They should instead help in breaking down the 'barbie doll' image of the flight attendants." Participant 77*

*"I am absolutely against the high-heeled shoe requirement. This rule is very sexist. Human health is more important. This requirement should be canceled immediately. We are not physical objects. It is the airlines that create a negative perception of the profession. The company wants passengers to respect us and our instructions but launches us as eye-pleasing physical objects." Participant 82 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)*

### 4.2.3. Increasing Number of Male Flight Attendants

*Although the participants have not listed physical incompetence as a career challenge, they've mentioned it in their suggestions. According to their statements, more male flight attendants are needed to help female flight attendants accomplish tasks that require physical strength, such as pulling stuff inside the cabin. In addition, they believe that male flight attendants would help female flight attendants deal with unruly passengers who jeopardize the safety of the flight. As expressed by the participants:*

*"Having at least one male flight attendant per flight makes the flight more comfortable for us. There are situations when we have to lift heavy stuff. In those cases, we need the physical strength of*

*men. So, I believe that there should be equal numbers of male and female flight attendants on every flight.” Participant 72*

“I think increasing the number of male flight attendants is very important and necessary. Although we receive training to stop physical violence coming from passengers on the plane, we have limited muscle strength by nature. So, we can be vulnerable to physical violence from passengers. Therefore, having equal numbers of female and male flight attendants on every flight would be better.” Participant 70 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

The participants also believe that increasing the number of male flight attendants would reduce the gender-based prejudice towards female flight attendants. Sample statements of the participants are as follows:

“Having men in the cabin balances many things. Even the perception of the passengers changes. They no longer take a sexist attitude towards us.” Participant 29

“In order to demolish the “sexy hostess” image and to overcome aggressive passengers, having male flight attendants is very beneficial.” Participant 41 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

Finally, respondents believe that balancing male and female flight attendant numbers would help eliminate the tension among female flight attendants. As expressed by the participants:

“It is difficult to work in a woman-dominated environment because women have a higher tendency to participate in gossiping, throw each other off, and are more envious and jealous of each other. These are far from the professionalism of working life. Thus, there should be a balance in the numbers of male and female flight attendants.” Participant 88

“Working in an environment where women are dominant can sometimes be difficult. My personal opinion is it is much more enjoyable to fly with male flight attendants because they are much easier to work with. Therefore, I think that the number of male flight attendants should be increased.” Participant 66 (See Supplementary Document 1 for more statements)

## 5. Discussions

A significant gender-based career challenge mentioned by the participants has been the companies’ strict make-up and cosmetics requirements. The participants have complained that these rules result in various physical health problems such as hair loss, irritation of the skin, eczema, and eye infections and place a psychological burden on them. Studies in the literature have also revealed that aesthetic labor requirements create challenges for flight attendants, such as being stressed and burdened (Tsauro and Tang, 2013). As body work theory explains, flight attendants are often required to dress a certain way and maintain a certain appearance, which can have negative consequences on their physical and emotional well-being (Gimlin, 2007). In addition, adherence to stereotypical gender roles has led to the perception of the cabin attendant occupation as being closely linked to feminine attributes. As a consequence, expectations have arisen that cabin attendants should comply with specific appearance guidelines and wear make-up (Hochschild, 1983; Tyler and Hancock, 2001). Based on the participants’ complaints and suggestions, it is recommended that companies reduce the make-up requirements of female flight attendants, and female flight attendants should be treated equally with male flight attendants in terms of these requirements. Airlines with relaxed make-up rules on female cabin crew must be presented as exemplary companies for other airlines that follow strict female appearance-related rules (e.g., NBCNews, 2019; Topham, 2019). An alternative solution for the companies is signing agreements with healthy and high-quality make-up brands and providing these products to flight attendants for free. In this way, they can reduce flight attendants’ make-up-related health problems and support them financially as flight attendants would no longer have to pay for these high-cost products.

Another important gender-based career challenge highlighted by the participants has been society’s negative prejudice towards female flight attendants. Being perceived as “easy women” or “sexual objects” or being labeled as “shameless” reveal what lies within the associated prejudice. The participants have agreed that companies contribute to the negative perception of the profession by

placing too much emphasis on their appearance. According to their statements, being launched as “eye-pleasing physical objects” and being treated as “marketing tools” by the companies reinforce the negative perception of flight attendants.

The strict make-up and guidelines imposed on female cabin attendants illustrate objectification, whereby women are predominantly valued for their physical attributes and are expected to comply with restrictive beauty ideals (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011). This objectification of female cabin crew triggers sexual harassment cases (Dailymail, 2014). Furthermore, as revealed in the literature, a widespread primitive stereotype that assumes that women who dress up or wear make-up are perceived to be more sexually available might also contribute to negative prejudice towards the profession (Mileva et al., 2016; Batres et al., 2018 as cited in Kellie et al., 2021).

The participants are also unhappy about being labeled as a woman not suitable for family life because of their irregular working hours and their overnight stays. In addition, they complain about being associated with extramarital affairs because of their working conditions. Stereotypical gender roles contribute to this negative perception of the profession. In numerous cultures, women are expected to serve as primary caregivers for children and manage household chores (Eagly, 1984). In addition, stereotypical gender roles are often related to the culture of a society. Namely, Turkish culture requires a mom or a wife to have more household roles (Kagnicioglu, 2017; Küçük, 2013). Even if she is working, she should choose jobs that would not necessitate her to stay out till late hours or stay out of home at night (Yanikoğlu et al., 2020). In addition, the majority of Turkey’s population is Muslim, and according to Islam, women are often expected to play their roles as obedient wives and mothers. Women are allowed to work only if the work does not cause them to neglect their household roles (Nasir, 2009; Yusuf, 1997). Moreover, according to Islam, women should avoid dresses that reveal their body lines and make-up applications that display their femininity (Martin et al., 2003). Therefore, some necessities of the job, such as wearing a skirt as part of a uniform or doing make-up may not be found appropriate in this culture. Also, the habitual promotion of female flight attendants’ gender and sexuality in advertisements and company marketing slogans might have led a Muslim society to perceive the profession as inappropriate for women. Regardless of the reasons, the profession’s negative perception creates a psychological challenge for female flight attendants.

Our suggestions to overcome the profession’s negative perception are as follows: i) informing the community about the responsibilities of flight attendants and their actual reason for being on board is essential. This can be done through public service announcements (PSAs) or advertisements highlighting flight attendants’ first aid skills, training, and safety roles on board. ii) News such as how a flight attendant rescues a drowning passenger on the plane or saves a passenger’s life by performing a cardio-pulmonary resuscitation can be boosted (e.g., Hurriyet, 2017; Godfrey, 2020). iii) Requiring female flight attendants to maintain their appearance and having irregular working hours do not justify making stereotypical inferences about their sexual activity or having a negative prejudice against them. Urgent actions need to be taken to create social awareness of this issue and initiate a perceptual change in society. Again, this can be done through PSAs.

In addition, sexual harassment has been highlighted as a serious career challenge by the participants. Based on the previous studies, it might be concluded that the use of flight attendants’ sexuality in advertisements and the consequent misperception triggers sexual harassment and abuse (Bates, 2017; Bullock, 2018; Lokenauth, 2018; Schneider, 2010). According to the objectification theory, when individuals view female cabin attendants as objects to satisfy their own gratification, it can ultimately result in sexual harassment (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, Dailymail, 2014). Therefore, to overcome this challenge, we recommend companies avoid such advertisements. In addition, to prevent sexual harassment faced by cabin attendants, airlines should have a well-defined and rigorous policy that prohibits sexual harassment and includes a reporting mechanism for victims. They should also train all employees on what constitutes sexual harassment, how to identify it, and how to report it. Airlines should ensure that there is a confidential reporting mechanism in place for cabin attendants to report any incidents of sexual harassment. Additionally, airlines should offer support to cabin attendants who have experienced sexual harassment, such as counseling services and assistance with legal action if necessary.

As an additional gender-based career challenge, some participants have highlighted the difficulty of working in a woman-dominated workplace and have suggested that the number of male flight attendants should increase. The participants believe that male flight attendants would help female flight attendants accomplish tasks that require pure physical strength, such as pulling trolleys or lifting stuff inside the cabin, and dealing with unruly passengers. They also believe that increasing the number of male flight attendants would help eliminate the tension among women and reduce the gender-based prejudice towards female flight attendants.

The expression of cabin attendants having difficulty in a woman-dominated workplace can be explained by horizontal hostility theory, which describes how women in the workplace engage in negative behavior towards each other (Mizrahi, 2004; Noor, Rehman, Ahmed, Sarmad, M., and Mehmood, 2023). To overcome this, companies can provide training to their employees to create awareness of horizontal hostility and its consequences. In addition, airlines can consider increasing male flight attendants to reduce the gender-based prejudice towards female flight attendants or to help female flight attendants accomplish tasks that require physical strength.

Some participants have stated that they have difficulty in balancing work-life balance, especially after becoming mothers. Especially, as the role conflict theory suggests, when a woman is expected to play multiple roles, such as being a wife, mother, and employee, it can lead to tension and stress (Boles, Wood, and Johnson, 2003; Voydanoff, 2005). In that sense, the partner's and family members' support is very important. In addition, companies may assign fewer layover duties to female flight attendants with children, especially to new moms.

Lastly, concerning the difficulty of working during their periods, companies may allow female flight attendants a one-day menstrual leave every month without showing any excuse (e.g., Sparks, 2020).

## 6. Limitations of the Study and Future Research

The limitation of open-ended questions is that people may be less willing to express themselves with long sentences and prefer to answer the questions briefly. That makes it difficult to achieve precise conclusions and justify the findings. However, thanks to the high number of respondents, this limitation has been overcome. There have been sufficient responses to support each finding.

A future study may focus on the challenges faced by female employees working in a women-dominated environment and the tension among women in the workplace, as this might hold women employees back from success. The findings may help overcome the stereotypes about female working relationships and help women support each other in professional life. In addition, since this study focused only on female flight attendants, future research may focus on the challenges experienced by male flight attendants working in a women-dominated workplace.

## 7. Conclusion

This research has aimed to give a voice to female flight attendants to understand the gender-based challenges they experience throughout their careers and help them with their career advancement. The findings of the study reveal that female flight attendants are experiencing several gender-based challenges, such as being subjected to strict make-up and cosmetics requirements, being treated unequally compared to male flight attendants, facing society's negative prejudice, confronting sexual harassment from passengers and male colleagues, having trouble in establishing authority on passengers because of their gender, and dealing with the difficulties associated with a woman-dominated workplace. The study has provided several recommendations to overcome these challenges, such as i) reducing make-up requirements to reduce the negative health issues associated with it, ii) highlighting flight attendants' first aid skills, training, and safety roles on board through PSAs and advertisements, iii) avoiding advertisement that use flight attendants' gender and sexuality, iv) assigning fewer layover duties to female flight attendants with children, and v) allowing female flight attendants a one-day menstrual leave every month without showing any excuse. The findings would help airline companies and society be aware of the difficulties female flight attendants experience. If followed, the suggestions provided would help in supporting female flight attendants'

career advancements. In addition, as harassment is widespread among flight attendants worldwide, this study may help shed light on the reasons behind it, and the findings would enable companies to take measures to cope with it.

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## Özet

Kabin memurluğu, dünyadaki en cinsiyet klişeleşmiş işlerden biridir. Düzensiz çalışma saatleri, zaman dilimi geçişleri, kısa dinlenme süreleri ve yüksek hizmet sunum taleplerini içeren zorlu koşullar altında çalışırlar. Uçuş görevlilerinin kariyer zorluklarına ilişkin yapılan çalışmalar çoğunlukla sağlıklı ilgili sorunlara odaklanmıştır ve bu sorunların çoğu cinsiyetten bağımsızdır. Yani hem erkek hem de kadın uçuş görevlileri tarafından benzer sorunlar deneyimlenmektedir. Havayollarında kabin memurlarının çoğunluğu kadınlardan oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışma özellikle kadın hosteslerin cinsiyete dayalı kariyer zorluklarını araştırmayı ve bu zorlukları hafifletmek için çözüm önerilerinde bulunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırma amaçlarına ulaşmak için Türkiye'de 4 havayolunda görev yapan 90 uçuş görevlisine açık uçlu anket uygulanmıştır. Sorularda, katılımcılara kariyerleri boyunca deneyimledikleri cinsiyete dayalı kariyer zorlukları ve bu zorluklarının üstesinden gelmek için şirketlere, yetkililere ve topluma sunmak istedikleri öneriler sorulmuştur. Ayrıca katılımcılara bu mesleğin kadın işi olduğuna inanıp inanmadıkları ve erkek hostesler hakkındaki görüşleri de sorulmuştur. Anket, profesyonel bir sosyal ağ platformu olan LinkedIn üzerinden Mayıs 2021 – Haziran 2021 tarihleri arasında kartopu tekniği ile dağıtılmıştır. Katılımcılardan toplanan veriler üzerinde içerik ve söylem analizleri yapılmıştır. Araştırmanın bulguları, kadın hosteslerin, katı makyaj ve kozmetik gerekliliklerine tabi tutulmaları, erkek hosteslere göre eşitsiz muamele görmeleri, toplumun olumsuz ön yargılarıyla karşılaşmaları, yolcuların cinsel tacizlerine maruz kalmaları gibi cinsiyete dayalı birçok zorluk yaşadıklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca kadın kabin memurları cinsiyetleri nedeniyle bazı yolcular üzerinde otorite kurmakta zorlanmakta ve kadın egemen bir işyerinin getirdiği zorluklarla baş etmeye çalışmaktadır. Araştırma, özellikle kadın hosteslerin hem iş hayatında hem de günlük yaşamlarında karşılaştıkları psikolojik zorlukları gözler önüne sermektedir. Topluma ve havayolu şirketi yönetimine sunulan öneriler, kadın kabin görevlileri için hem psikolojik hem de fizyolojik olarak daha sağlıklı bir çalışma ortamı yaratmayı ve kariyer gelişimlerini desteklemeyi amaçlamaktadır.