



Femininity in Flight: A History of Flight Attendants (Radical Perspectives)

By Kathleen Barry

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“In her new chic outfit, she looks like anything but a stewardess working. But work she does. Hard, too. *And you hardly know it.*” So read the text of a 1969 newspaper advertisement for Delta Airlines featuring a picture of a brightly smiling blond stewardess striding confidently down the aisle of an airplane cabin to deliver a meal.

From the moment the first stewardesses took flight in 1930, flight attendants became glamorous icons of femininity. For decades, airlines hired only young, attractive, unmarried white women. They marketed passenger service aloft as an essentially feminine exercise in exuding charm, looking fabulous, and providing comfort. The actual work that flight attendants did—ensuring passenger safety, assuaging fears, serving food and drinks, all while conforming to airlines’ strict rules about appearance—was supposed to appear effortless; the better that stewardesses performed by airline standards, the more hidden were their skills and labor. Yet today flight attendants are acknowledged safety experts; they have their own unions. Gone are the no-marriage rules, the mandates to retire by thirty-two. In *Femininity in Flight*, Kathleen M. Barry tells the history of flight attendants, tracing the evolution of their glamorized image as ideal women and their activism as trade unionists and feminists.

Barry argues that largely because their glamour obscured their labor, flight attendants unionized in the late 1940s and 1950s to demand recognition and respect as workers and self-styled professionals. In the 1960s and 1970s, flight attendants were one of the first groups to take advantage of new laws prohibiting sex discrimination. Their challenges to airlines’ restrictive employment policies and exploitive marketing practices (involving skimpy uniforms and provocative slogans such as “fly me”) made them high-profile critics of the cultural mystification and economic devaluing of “women’s work.” Barry combines attention to the political economy and technology of the airline industry with perceptive readings of popular culture, newspapers, industry publications, and first-person accounts. In so doing, she provides a potent mix of social and cultural history and a major contribution to the history of women’s work and working women’s activism.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1076742 in Books
- Brand: Duke University Press Books
- Published on: 2007-02-28
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.21" h x .79" w x 6.04" l, 1.01 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 328 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Femininity in Flight* is outstanding. It is the most thoroughly presented book on femininity, work, and pink-collar activism to date. It expands the contours of the women’s rights movement and complicates the grounds on which women make demands for better working conditions.”— Eileen Boris, author of *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States*

“*Femininity in Flight* is the first book that tells the story of the flight attendant occupation as a whole and gives us the history of the occupation in so compelling and rich a fashion. Kathleen M. Barry offers us an entertaining and witty account of how flight attendants embodied changing notions of femininity, and then she boldly challenges conventional wisdom by arguing that it was those very cultural constraints that in part spurred flight attendant activism.”— Dorothy Sue Cobble, author of *The Other Women’s Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*

“[*Femininity in Flight*] combines all the strengths of a scholarly monograph—extensive archival research, a solid historiographical framework—with the kind of stylish layout and eye-catching illustration more common in books for the general reader. And Barry writes with clarity and wit. She tells a complicated story, but engrossingly.”
(Joshua Zeitz *American Heritage*)

“*Femininity in Flight* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of labor feminism, joining a body of work that challenges the notion that feminism was essentially a white middle-class movement. . . . A great read; it will keep you enlightened and entertained through even a lengthy flight delay.”
(Nan Enstad, *Labor History*)

“[A] sophisticated and detailed study of flight attendants. . . . One of the many strengths of Barry’s book is the incorporation of the history of technology into her social and cultural analysis. . . . Readers will learn much from this deeply researched book.”
(Dennis A. Deslippe, *The Historian*)

“Barry provides an entertaining study of American flight attendants since the 1930s, filling a major void in scholarship on labour history, women’s history, and tourism. Drawing particularly on memoirs, union records, and industry publications, Barry convincingly argues that stewardesses and their allies were vital to the advancement of second-wave feminism and the modern labour movement.”
(Anthony J. Stanonis *Canadian Journal of History*)

“Barry shows how ‘pink-collar’ activists among the ranks of flight attendants worked to improve the status of their profession. . . . Barry argues that the struggle to win professional respect was made particularly difficult by the conflict between the effortless glamour that attendants were expected to project and the tedium and difficulty of their actual responsibilities.”
(The New Yorker)

“Barry tells a fascinating story about the history of flight attendants and their success challenging deeply rooted gendered stereotypes that were largely invented by the airline industry to maximize profit and then exploited by air travelers and the public at large. . . . [E]ssential reading for historians and students of the twentieth century.”

(Lisa Phillips *Labour/Le Travail*)

“Barry’s feminist analysis is clever and somewhat poignant, for it sees that in the role of the air hostess a vision of female selfhood and freedom has been forced to rub, rather uncomfortably, against a rather ogling set of corporate requirements.”

(Andrew O’Hagan *London Review of Books*)

“Soar through the pleasures and plights of females in flight with this highly informative read. . . . With a no nonsense writing style, well-documented evidence, and telling photos (marvel at the hot pants uniform on page 183), Barry demonstrates how flight attendants’ long history of organizing and fighting for their rights made them crusaders for all women and key contributors to second-wave feminism. After reading this you’ll step on a plane wanting to salute any veteran attendants for their journey as you embark on your own.”

(Paula Wehmeyer, *Bust*)

“This well-researched book traces the evolution of flight attendants from glamorous sky queens to cabin safety experts and members of trade unions.”

(Air & Space)

"One of the great strengths of *Femininity in Flight* is the broad context within which Barry views flight attendants' struggles, in terms of women's work, union organisation and second-wave feminism. By contextualising her study so well and drawing out the parallels between stewardesses and other pink-collar workers, Barry has produced a book with wide appeal and relevance to many interested in labour history, the women's movement, and the growth of service work."

(Rosie Cox *Times Higher Education Supplement*)

From the Publisher

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From the Back Cover

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