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Care, Confinement and Capital: Women's Work in Homestays and the Gendered
Political Economy of Hospitality

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Abstract

Homestays, a growing community-based hospitality business in rural tourism, are widely advocated as a locus of women's empowerment by granting entrepreneurial roles, social status, decision-making power, income, and self-confidence. Yet, such empowerment remains embedded within structured gender inequalities. Existing literature from India and beyond highlight how women's participation reinforces gendered division of labour by confining them to the dual burden of domestic work and care responsibilities. This paper, through a critical review of secondary scholarship, extends the existing discussion by drawing on sociological and feminist theories on the marketisation and commodification of women's labour, nature and culture binary, social reproduction, and feminist political economy. It shows how women's hospitality work is naturalised and familiarised through family care skills, their emotional labour is devalued as innate feminine traits, the flexible working hours in a fixed domestic space limit their social mobility; all contributing to the reproduction of traditional gendered differences as marketable assets for a globalised economy. This paper argues that while homestays offer women's economic visibility as entrepreneurs, they ultimately reinforce rather than bring transformative change in patriarchal labour hierarchies.

Keywords

Homestays, Gendered Labour, Literature Review, Feminist Theories, Tourism Studies, Hospitality Work

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Introduction

Homestays is a home-based industry that offers tourists an authentic experience of staying with the host family, while participating in their everyday local culture in the rural regions (MacCannell 1976; Acharya and Halpenny 2013). It is a booming hospitality sector that involves majority participation of women from local communities in the rural ecotourism industry (Yaja *et al.* 2023). There has been increasing feminisation of the workplace (Elson 1999) in the community-based tourism sector globally. Women constitute 54 per cent of total employment in the global tourism workforce (World Tourism Organization 2020: 9) and 57 per cent in the homestay business (Panta and Thapa 2018: 21 as cited in Hagg 2025), symbolising gender empowerment, cultural heritage, ecological preservation, and rural economic development (Yaja *et al.* 2023: 2).

Participation of women in running homestay services has benefitted the rural economy and them personally through income generation, social status upliftment, self-confidence, decision-making skills, communication abilities, leadership, and creativity (Quang *et al.* 2024). However, this visibility often obscures the structured gender inequalities and patriarchal hierarchies that organise this labour. While existing tourism studies frequently discuss whether homestay entrepreneurship is a pathway to women's empowerment and rural development, the structural inequalities underlying these economies remain undertheorised within tourism scholarship, particularly from a feminist theoretical perspective.

By bringing feminist and sociological theoretical analyses of gendered labour and space into dialogue with tourism studies, this paper offers a critical review of homestay economies as sites where women's domestic, emotional and reproductive labour is not merely a source of

economic visibility and empowerment but a central mechanism through which gendered labour hierarchies are reproduced and commodified.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative review of secondary literature to critically examine women's entrepreneurial agency within homestay rural tourism as simultaneously enabling and structurally constraining. Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches on Google Scholar as the primary academic database due to its extensive indexing of peer-reviewed and interdisciplinary literature. Keywords such as 'homestay tourism', 'women entrepreneurs', 'gendered division of labour', 'commodification and hospitality labour', 'feminist political economy', 'emotional labour', and 'domestic labour' were used, along with reference tracking and screening of frequently cited work.

The selection criteria prioritised peer-reviewed academic publications, theoretical texts, policy reports, and case-based research on women empowerment within homestay tourism in India and globally. Non-academic materials and studies not directly relevant to gendered labour relations were excluded. While the review engages with global scholarship, particular attention was given to empirical studies from Asia and other Global South contexts where homestay tourism has expanded as a development strategy.

The review primarily considered literature published from the 1990s onwards, emphasising the neoliberal tourism economy, alongside foundational theoretical works by scholars such as Federici, Ortner, Hochschild, Bair, Fraser, Kabeer, Massey, Mies, and Mohanty. The selected literature was analysed thematically by focussing on feminisation of labour, spatial gendered division of labour, nature and culture, commodification of care, gendered capitalism, social reproduction, and decolonising feminist perspective.

Feminisation of Labour and Gendered Division of Work

The main tasks performed by women in the homestays include cooking, cleaning, gardening, housekeeping, communication with the guests, laundry, menu planning, assisting the kitchen, etc. as these are familiarised as the traditional skills mastered by women (Quang *et al.* 2024: 5–6). The hospitable and family care skills are considered their innate qualities performed with ease, comfort and familiarity (Quang *et al.* 2024: 6). The increased feminisation of labour (Elson 1999) blurs domestic and public boundaries, creating a triple burden of daily household work, care and entrepreneurship (Hagg 2025: 8). In contrast, men's public tasks include transporting, tour guiding, repairing, negotiating with travel companies, major decision making, business management, and everything outside the proximity of the household (*ibid.*). Women empowerment in the homestay economies is symbolised through entrepreneurship that capitalises on their domestic role, thereby reinforcing the traditional gendered occupation-based segregation (Panta and Thapa 2017: 3).

Marriage and family are also the 'unjust' institutions that expose women to asymmetrical vulnerability of dependency, exploitation and abuse in the homestay service sector (Okin 1989 as cited in Hagg 2025: 120). Married women are considered ideal for business due to flexibility in the working hours within the domestic sphere, which allows them to balance household chores and business, reinforcing the belief that domestic responsibilities and care work are their primary responsibility (Yaja *et al.* 2023: 8). The paid work of the women within the household results in less social conflict due to non-negligence of domestic responsibilities (Osman 2009: 26) as compared to entrepreneurial tourist activities outside their home, which threatens the culturally defined normative gender roles (Behara and Niranjana 2012 as cited in Kannegieser 2015: 13). Thus, under the guise of inclusivity and economic visibility, homestay participation often reproduces existing gender hierarchies rather than redistributing responsibilities (Panta and Thapa 2017: 5).

Spatial Confinement and Gendered Labour

While the feminisation of labour within homestay tourism economies reflects the increasing participation of women, this labour remains spatially confined within the domestic sphere. The increasing women's participation in the rural homestay is recognised as self-employment and entrepreneurship, while restricting women to the traditional role of femininity, domestic work and care responsibilities under the guise of empowerment.

Doreen Massey's (1994) conceptualisation of gendered division of labour through a spatial lens provides a useful interpretation of social location that restricts women's social mobility. She argues that spaces and places are highly gendered and socially constructed through power relations that naturalises women belonging to the private space as homemakers and men being the public face as breadwinners (Massey 1994: 186–188). With the spread of capitalist relation of production, patriarchy and capitalism converged to maintain the gendered division of labour, visible even in the contemporary service sector (ibid.: 191–192).

Unpaid work of women at home is supplemented by low paid informal work such as laundry, childcare, etc., which confines them to the reproductive roles within the domestic space. This intensified sexual division of labour stereotypes women's work as unskilled or semiskilled and men's work as skilled (ibid.: 193–199). Hence, women running the homestays are more concerned about gaining excellence in cooking and hospitality-related skills (Panta and Thapa 2017: 13).

However, women homestay entrepreneurs also report concerns about lacking education, language barrier, limited marketing and networking skills, but are rarely offered any formal training for skill enhancement (ibid.). Nussbaum (2011) has emphasised that women's internal capabilities are affected by the lack of training courses, which limits their skill

development and knowledge production. While men receive business related skill courses, women are limited to cooking and tour guide classes (Hagg 2025: 23).

The core element of empowerment and agency, which is the ability to make strategic life choices and decision-making authority seems to be limited in women's life in the homestay business (Kabeer 1999; Panta and Thapa 2017). Naila Kabeer (1999: 439) noted that it is not about the differences that lead to preferential choice but the inequalities that embody denial of choice. Women and men both are aware of the inequalities in terms of women shouldering heavier workloads in the private space, but these inequalities are far from being questioned as 'unjust' (ibid.: 439–440).

Even though there is enhanced income and status visibility, it is not synonymous with power. There is a hierarchy in decision-making responsibilities where key areas are covered by men and others such as household consumption, children's health and marriage are assigned to women in their capacity as mother, wife, daughter, occupying a 'backstage' role (ibid.: 446). Women within the homestay services still lack participation in community level decision-making and leadership positions (Panta and Thapa 2017: 4). They are also underrepresented at the management level and have limited control over household finances (Yaja *et al.* 2023: 3). Kabeer (1999: 439) argues that economic prosperity may reduce gender inequality in basic wellbeing but simultaneously intensify women's subordination.

The Nature–Culture Binary

While gendered labour is spatially organised in domestic and public space, Ortner's (1972) nature–culture framework provides a cultural logic that legitimises the segregation of labour. Ortner argues that the subordination of women doesn't arise from the biological determined differences, but from the culturally defined binary of superiority and inferiority between men and women, which turns differences into hierarchy and inequality (Ortner 1972:

70). The universality of the secondary status of women is a pan-cultural fact in every socio-economic aspect of the society (ibid.: 67).

Women's biological function of childbirth and lactation, culturally interpreted as natural, confines them to the domestic sphere where they perform social roles of nurturing and caregiving (ibid.: 77–80). In contrast, men are seen as creators of symbolic systems and institutions in the public sphere, which are culturalised to be viewed as transcending in nature (ibid.). Although women's caregiving and nurturing roles mediate between nature and culture, they are often naturalised as mere extensions of reproduction and domesticity, thereby reinforcing women's subordination (ibid.: 84–86).

Emotional Labour and the Marketisation of Care

Building on the culturally defined naturalisation of women's domestic roles, Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour explains how these gendered expectations become commodified within service-based tourism economies. Affection, love and empathy, once seen as private emotions, are advertised, promised, sold, and performed as part of their services (Hochschild 1983: 331). It is precisely because 'women and friendly service go together' (Hochschild 1983: 329). Just as Hochschild (1983) studied how flight attendants are trained to sell their emotional labour through smiles, laughter, warm gestures, and friendly behaviour to the passengers by suppressing their genuine feelings, female service providers within the homestay are expected to enact similar forms of emotional labour. Their role involves making guests feel relaxed and comfortable while sharing stories of everyday life, conversing and creating a hospitable and cheerful atmosphere (Quang *et al.* 2024: 8). They are expected to deal with harmony even when the guests show rigidity in terms of food preferences or adjustment with the facilities of the homestay (Yaja *et al.* 2023: 7). Hospitality, attentiveness,

diligence, and openness are considered women's innate qualities and hence suitable for homestay services (Quang *et al.* 2024: 7).

Women's emotional labour is further commodified when customers rate and evaluate their behaviour (Hochschild 1983: 332). Even at the expense of burnout and exhaustion due to prolonged flexible working hours, this labour remains undervalued and exploited as culturally perceived to be a 'natural' extension of women's caregiving role (Ortner 1972: 85). Emotional labour operates silently (Hochschild 1983: 333) and becomes an asset for the homestay enterprise where women continue to provide nurture and care for the elders, husband and children in the household, concealing their personal feelings and emotions. Hochschild argues that commercial logic in the post-industrial society is infiltrating every aspect of life including the private, psychological and sacred part of oneself and soul, transforming emotion itself into a market commodity (*ibid.*).

Global Production and Gendered Capitalism

Feminist political economy situates women's emotional and domestic labour within broader global capitalist relations. Global production in the neoliberal global economy capitalises on these 'differences' as resources that add value to the market and feminise the labour market (Bair 2010: 204). Female labour is culturally assumed to be 'cheap, docile, and dexterous' and hence exploited for profit-making purposes, whether in factories or in homestays (*ibid.*: 211). Gender is not just a social identity shaped by globalisation but a constitutive element that sustains and produces globalisation itself (Freeman 1993 as cited in Bair 2010: 206). These gendered identities are marketed as a part of the 'authentic' hospitality experience, reinforcing rather than dismantling the traditional gendered hierarchies (Bair 2010).

Freeman (1993), as Bair (2010: 206) discusses, rejects the dichotomy of global and local because gendered differences such as nurture, care, cooking, and other domestic roles within the homestays actively sustain the globalised neoliberal tourism industry as marketable assets, emphasising a mutually constitutive relationship. Even the female bodies and their reproductive labour in maintaining the authenticity of cuisine, attire, etc. become a part of the global tourist gaze, a subtle form of commodification (Urry 1990).

Bair (2010) highlighted that Mies (1981) was the first to shift the narrative from female factory workers to the exploitation of female home-based lace workers, identified as 'housewives' even after fully integrating into the capitalist labour market (Mies 1981 as cited in Bair 2010: 209). As patriarchy and capitalism reinforced each other, their labour was undervalued as leisure work and supplementary to the income of the man working in the factory (ibid.: 210). The cultural ideology of the housewife that confines women to the domestic role naturalises their labour to be cheap and secondary while exploiting their labour for surplus global production (ibid.). Thus, the domestic space becomes a productive site of value extraction where domestic and care work is mobilised for market-based hospitality (Bair 2010).

Reproductive Labour and Capitalist Accumulation

Extending this discussion of gendered labour in global capitalism, social reproduction theorists highlight how unpaid capitalist accumulation remains central to the broader aspects of capitalism. Federici (2014) questions the unequal divide instigated by capitalism, which treats market oriented productive labour done by men in the factories to be superior to the reproductive labour of the women in households. Production of goods is regarded as value-creating, whereas reproductive labour is naturalised and dismissed as 'non-value' work (Federici 2014). Social reproductive theorists such as Federici (2012) have emphasised that, in

contrast, the female domestic and care work, which is considered natural and unproductive, is sustaining the capitalist needs and the productive labour force.

Federici (2014: 86) also gives a feminist critique of the Marxian theory of capitalist exploitation of labour that excludes the exploitation of female reproductive labour without differentiating between commodity production and production of the workforce. The 1960–70s saw an uprising against the sexual division of labour; it demanded the recognition of housework as a value-producing service, drawing a connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position (ibid.: 89–93).

However, even the expansion of the service sector in the neoliberal regime did not witness any transformation in the sexual division of labour due to the persistence of home-based unpaid female reproductive labour embedded in the capitalistic division of production and reproduction (Federici 2014: 93). Within the homestay tourism business, most women reflected their services to be limited to the domestic labour and care work, which are outsourced in the capitalist neoliberal regime in a low-waged and exploitative condition (Federici 2008 as cited in Kalisch 2022). While women's market participation is celebrated, it conceals the precarity mirroring structural devaluation of domestic work (ibid.).

With the structural adjustment programme and reduction of the state welfare service in the neoliberal capitalism, the burden of care and survival has been shifted to individuals, particularly the women of the household (Federici 2014: 93–94). This ideology of self-investment has recast workers as 'microentrepreneurs' where care and reproduction have become privatised, individualised and feminised (ibid.). The marketisation of housework and the commercialisation of care globally have not reduced the exploitation faced by women but enhanced the dual or triple responsibilities in the reproduction of labour (ibid.: 101).

The re-centring of reproductive labour in the home is also due to increase in the informal economy and de-concentration of industrial production, resulting in a reconfiguration of home-based labour on market basis (ibid.: 102). The reorganisation of unpaid labour for the market generates profit but remains undervalued, often compensated with minimum wages (Staples 2006 as cited in Federici 2014: 102). Even in homestays, although women earn an income while balancing domestic and care-giving responsibilities, this reorganisation continues to reinforce the sexual division of labour, with earnings far lower than in formal employment settings (ibid.). Increased female employment has therefore not structurally transformed the gendered division of labour (ibid.: 103).

The Contradiction of Capital and Care

While analysing the hidden economic value of reproductive labour, Nancy Fraser expands this argument by examining the structural tension between capitalist accumulation and social reproduction. Fraser (2013) also addresses how reduction in the 'social protection' with the state reforms in the neoliberal economy has further marginalised women by the feminisation of the workforce in the service sectors. The rhetoric of 'self-reliance' romanticises precarity, transforming women's survival strategies into symbols of agency (Elias and Roberts 2016: 190).

Neoliberalism has dismantled the state protection to marketise and privatise social reproduction such as healthcare, education and care work, thereby shifting the individualised responsibilities disproportionately to the women of the household (ibid.). Fraser (2016) emphasised that care has become a commodity in the neoliberal globalised economy, arguing that the resulting 'care crisis' reflects a contradiction that undermines women's reproductive labour within capitalism (ibid.). In the homestays sector, the familiarity, friendliness and

hospitality, usually performed by women are a form of emotional labour that is commodified and sold to the guests of the homestays (Quang *et al.* 2024).

Fraser (2013 as cited in Kroik 2014) introduces the concept of ‘dangerous liaison’ between second-wave feminism of the 1970s and contemporary neoliberalism in the West, emphasising that the radical critique of capitalism and patriarchy got absorbed in legitimising the neoliberal globalised economy. Radical feminist goals such as independence, flexibility and empowerment are being marketised in the neoliberal economy (Fraser as cited in Kroik 2014). Fraser emphasised that what started as a collective feminist sentiment became a depoliticised individualised achievement within the persisting structural inequality (*ibid.*). The valorisation of women as wage earners, for instance, emerged as a response to feminist critique of male ‘breadwinners’ model, but it has pushed women into low-wage occupations and dual responsibility (*ibid.*: 292–293). Celebrating empowerment, flexibility and choice as individual achievements fail to capture the structured inequality that sustain women’s dual responsibilities.

Decolonising Feminist Political Economy

While many feminist political economies are rooted in Western context, Mohanty (2003) critiques the analysis by foregrounding the experience of women in the Global South and arguing for a feminist perspective attentive to the specificities of Third World context. Feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 514) have argued that, with the reduction in social protection, global capitalism has recolonised and privatised women’s body and labour under exploitative patriarchal control. She also critiques second-wave feminism for catering primarily to Western, white, heterosexual women, whereby Eurocentric universal theories reproduce colonial hierarchies (*ibid.*). Mohanty (2003) cited Mies (1982) to argue for an analysis of gendered local context in relation to the broader ideologies of capitalism. Mohanty

argues for understanding contextual local experiences of women in the Global South to have an empirical insight into how capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism operate (Mohanty 2003: 510).

Case studies on the local homestays in various parts of the Global South such as Vietnam, Nepal, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, etc. have highlighted the transnationalist capitalist chain that commodifies local 'authentic' culture, women's bodies and reproductive labour to sustain the globalised economy (Urry 1990; Singh *et al.* 2015; Panta and Thapa 2017; Yaja *et al.* 2023; Quang *et al.* 2024). Even societies with a matrilineal structure, such as Meghalaya, are also not exempted from male domination in the tourism sector, where women continue to occupy secondary positions and face heavier workloads (Dutta 2023: 26). Feminist theory, therefore, needs to be inclusive of the localised experiences of inequality and subordination in the domestic space (Massey 1994: 194) with the universalised image of homemaker and breadwinner in order to critically understand the macro and micropolitics of everyday life in the neoliberal economy (Mohanty 2003: 504).

Conclusion

Homestay tourism as a community-based workspace reveals how neoliberal development reconfigures rather than transforms the gendered division of labour under the guise of empowerment, agency and equality. While the expansion of homestays brings women greater visibility, income opportunities and social recognition, it still commodifies their domestic, emotional and care labour that has historically been naturalised as women's responsibilities. The feminisation of the homestay workforce therefore symbolises a paradox of 'empowered domesticity' that caters to market visibility.

Drawing on feminist political economy and social reproduction perspectives, this paper demonstrates that the celebration of women's entrepreneurship in homestays often conceals

deeper structural inequalities. Discourses on empowerment, flexibility and self-reliance frequently operate within neoliberal economies, which rely on the continuous exploitation and invisibilisation of reproductive labour. Therefore, women's participation can enhance economic visibility while intensifying emotional, physical and domestic workloads.

A truly transformative approach to women's participation in homestay tourism would require moving beyond market-centred narratives of development. Recognising and valuing reproductive and emotional labour, redistributing care responsibilities and enabling meaningful participation of women in community level decision-making are crucial for challenging entrenched gender hierarchies. Hence, for a real development strategy that counts, future research endeavours must critically assess how tourism economies can determine structural transformation towards more equitable gender relations rather than merely supporting women's economic participation.

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