

**United States House of Representatives  
Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues**

**The Honorable Susan Brooks and Lois Frankel, Co-Chairs**

*Beyond the Headlines:  
Combatting Service Sector Sexual Harassment in the Age of #MeToo*

Monday, March 19, 2018



**Written Testimony of  
Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO**

Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO  
501 Third Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001  
[www.afacwa.org](http://www.afacwa.org)  
International President, Sara Nelson  
Government Affairs Director Stephen Schembs, 202-434-0568

The national discussion on sexual assault and sexual harassment has lifted the veil on a silent epidemic in our society. We are so grateful to Congresswomen Frankel and Brooks along with the entire Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues for holding these hearings. Sexual harassment is not about sex; it is about power. This "#MeToo" moment is our opportunity to make real change and these hearings give voice to frontline solutions that will make everyone safer. It will also make all of us better as both women and men can contribute equally at work and in our democracy. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this important discussion.

My name is Sara Nelson. I am the International President of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, AFL-CIO, and I am a qualified twenty-two year Flight Attendant. Our union represents 50,000 Flight Attendants at twenty airlines.

Flight Attendants, about 80 percent women, are ongoing victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Not that long ago, the industry marketed the objectification of "stewardesses," a job only available to young, single, perfectly polished women who until 1993 were required to step on a weight scale. Just last year, Qatar CEO Al Baker referred to U.S. Flight Attendants as grandmothers and bragged about his younger crews that passenger want to look at. Our union was formed to give women a voice and to beat back discrimination and misogyny faced on the job.

We defined our careers at the bargaining table, in the courts and on Capitol Hill. We taught the country to leave the word "stewardess" in the history books. I want to recognize the founders of our union and all of the women and men who have fought for respect on the job, through contracts, laws and regulations that back us up. But the industry never disavowed the marketing schemes featuring short skirts, hot pants and ads that had young women saying things like "I'm Cheryl, fly me."

Even today, we are called pet names, patted on the rear when a passenger wants our attention, cornered in the back galley and asked about our "hottest" layover, and subjected to incidents not fit for print. Like the rest of our society, Flight Attendants have never had reason to believe that reports of the sexual harassment we experience on the job would be taken seriously, rather than dismissed or retaliated against. A survey of our members just last year showed the majority of Flight Attendants have no knowledge of written guidance or training on this issue available through their airline.

We have often been the target of sexual harassment; we are charged with the safety of everyone on board; we must de-escalate conflict; we have never before had assurance the issue of sexual harassment or sexual assault would be taken seriously; and we are managing more passengers than ever with fewer of us to respond.

In December of 2017, after the launch of the #MeToo movement, I publicly called on airline chief executives to speak up on this issue. I said, "It would be powerful to hear these men clearly and forcefully denounce the past objectification of Flight Attendants, reinforce our safety role as aviation's first responders and pledge zero tolerance of sexual harassment and sexual assault at the airlines."

Credibility from the industry on this issue isn't only about keeping only Flight Attendants safe. It is absurd to think that a group of people frequently harassed for decades can effectively become enforcers during emergencies without this level of clarity about the respect we deserve. Knowing that CEOs back us up will also make it easier for Flight Attendants to intervene when

passengers are sexually harassed or assaulted on planes. Flight Attendants need to know the airlines will take this as seriously as any other safety duty we perform.

We applaud two CEOs who immediately responded to our request.

Alaska CEO Brad Tilden took the opportunity to learn from a recent event on an Alaska plane. Instead of being critical of the victim or the Flight Attendants, he and his management team recognized this as a moment for reflection.

They took swift corrective action to support the victim and supported the Flight Attendants. Alaska management is now working with AFA leaders at Alaska to address this issue in a meaningful way with policies, training and resources to address this repulsive behavior and change our collective experience. We invite other airlines to follow their lead.

At United Airlines, CEO Oscar Munoz also immediately responded to our call for attention to this issue.

In a public letter to all of United's employees Oscar said, "the success of our society will only progress as far and fast as our sisters and daughters enjoy the same rights, respect and opportunities as our brothers and sons... When you join the United team, or when you board a United flight, you can be sure that by doing so you are expressing your support of a company that backs up our words with our actions. There is no place for sexual harassment at United and I am asking that you all join with me in making a commitment of zero tolerance to all of our colleagues and customers."

Munoz's letter also clearly recognizes the role we play in the safety of aviation. He did exactly what we asked and the airline is continuing to work with us on spreading this message through clear policy and inclusion of this issue in our annual training.

Flight Attendants are optimistic this is the moment where we can put "coffee, tea, or me" behind us and lift our careers.

## **Solutions**

Our Flight Attendant union calls on airports, airlines, and government agencies to immediately enlist everyone traveling in an effort to stop sexual harassment and sexual assault. The greater the discussion around denouncing these acts, the safer all passengers, crew and airport workers will be.

We call on the industry to take this issue seriously with increased Flight Attendant staffing, clear policies, reporting of the unique crime of sexual assault, and include training on the issue as part of our safety training.

We strongly support forming a stakeholder task force of government agencies, air carriers, Flight Attendant and pilot unions, passenger rights/consumer protection groups and organizations that specialize in responding to sexual assault and harassment. The purpose of the task force would be to identify guidelines and best practices for responding to sexual assault and harassment aboard commercial aircraft. Based on the findings, the task force would develop minimum standards for training for employees and guidance for incident reporting.

Thank you again for the opportunity to take part in this discussion. We look forward to your questions.