

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

Monday, March 19, 2018, 2:00 p.m.

Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues

Sara Nelson, oral testimony as prepared

Thank you to the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues Co-Chairs Lois Frankel and Susan Brooks, Vice-Chairs Brenda Lawrence and Mimi Walters, as well as Congresswomen Comstock and Speier.

Your efforts to lift the voices of victims of sexual harassment in the service sector is not only appreciated by aviation's first responders and the 50,000 members of Association of Flight Attendants, we believe the dialog you are supporting makes all of us safer. Lifting the veil on this silent epidemic in society and our workplaces will promote equality and help us make the most out of this new age of #MeToo.

Sexual harassment is not about sex; it is about power. 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 passengers

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 too awful to recall. 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.

In December of 2017, after the launch of the #MeToo movement, I publicly called on airline chief executives to “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.”

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.

I applaud Alaska CEO Brad Tilden and United CEO Oscar Munoz. They immediately spoke up when asked, and they are leading the industry in this dialog, putting in place tools and training for frontline workers and working to change forever the culture toward true equality.

Our union is currently conducting a survey of our members to quantify the frequency of verbal and physical sexual harassment in the air in the last 12 months. The survey is open now and we expect to have results by the first week of April. Already thousands of Flight Attendants from 32 airlines have responded and preliminary results show that approximately 3 in 4 flight attendants have experienced sexual harassment, while only 7% of those flight attendants have reported it to their employer. 68% of respondents have not noticed any employer efforts to address sexual harassment at work over the past 12 months.

Still, Flight Attendants are hopeful this is the moment we can put “coffee, tea, or me” behind us and lift our careers.

We are seeking a wide range of solutions.

We call 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 – in order to identify guidelines and best practices for responding to sexual assault and harassment aboard commercial aircraft as well as minimum standards for training and incident reporting of sexual assault as a unique crime.

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