



Thinking about Gender in Aviation

Introduction

Have you ever considered how your gender (the way you present in public, in terms of whether people interpret you to be male or female), impacts your daily life? Does your gender play a role in how you do your job... or the fact that you even ended up in a career in aviation in the first place?

In Canada, women make up approximately 6% of the airline pilot population. (The percentage is even lower for AMEs and Controllers.) In a profession that is facing a global pilot shortage, are employers overlooking an obvious solution? How can airlines and other organizations within the aviation industry make their workplaces more female-friendly?

Two Stories

The following two stories are based on real-life events in two different airlines in Canada. Identifying details have been removed to preserve anonymity. As you read them, consider the following: How does gender play a role in what transpired? Who was affected? How might things have been handled differently in a workplace with more females workers in supervisory and decision-making roles?

Story A - Stunned Silence	Story B - Painful Pairing
<p>Bob was sitting at a table in the crew room, drinking a coffee and reviewing weather reports on the computer. Nearby, four of his male colleagues were standing around talking about a pilot with a "hot body" and "wicked boobs", and making general comments about her and how she got the job, why she was hired and so on.</p> <p>As Bob listened to his colleagues carry on, he felt weird. It was as though they were all actors saying these things but not really.... Like it wasn't them really telling the story but like they were saying what they thought they should say or what they had heard from others.</p> <p>As Bob tried to formulate an appropriate interjection in his mind, he looked towards the back of the room. His heart sunk: A female captain was behind the partition briefing her crew and clearly heard all of it. She poked her head over the partition to indicate that the boys had an audience... but they never saw her, and had no idea that she heard it all.</p> <p>Bob wanted to say something to these clowns -- you DON'T talk like that in the crew room! But he didn't know what to say, and they soon left the room together, joking noisily as the door swung shut behind them.</p>	<p>Jessica was nervous. She had been flying for nearly 15 years, having grown up flying weekends in her cousin's Cessna 150, and gotten her own PPL and CPL as soon as she was old enough to do so. After completing a math degree at university, Jessica had returned to flying, and worked for several years as a bush pilot in Northern Canada before landing a job as an FO with a regional airline. After making captain there and flying for several more years, Jessica decided it was time to fly bigger metal. She left for a larger airline, which eagerly hired her, given her depth of experience, and the excellent references she presented from her previous employers.</p> <p>Jessica had been flying with her current airline for nearly a year... but still she was nervous.</p> <p>The captain she was paired with for today's flight was one she had flown with before. During previous pairings, he kept complaining about the way the company was hiring pilots. He told Jessica that the only reason why she got hired was because she was a female pilot, not because of her skills, but because the company wanted to increase their hiring of female pilots.</p> <p>Needless to say, Jessica found the captain's attitude offensive and frustrating. Worse than that, however, Jessica felt that the captain's commentary created an unsafe atmosphere in the cockpit. Ever the professional, Jessica took a deep breath and prepared to join her crew, including the captain, for their pre-flight briefing. She made a mental note to request that she not be paired with this captain again. She would figure out later how to explain her request, should anyone question it.</p>

Reflection Questions:

- In Story A, why was what the men said inappropriate? How were their comments undermining not just the female colleague whom they were discussing, but *all* female pilots?
- Other than the female captain who overheard the comments, who else might have been negatively affected by what happened? Why?
- What could you say if you overheard colleagues talking like this about another staff member (regardless of gender)?
- In Story B, the female pilot was frustrated, but didn't address her concerns directly with the captain. Should she have spoken to him? Why or why not?
- How does this kind of gender bias impact other "gender-non-traditional" aviation employees (e.g. male flight attendants, female AMEs, trans workers in all areas, etc.)?

Discussion & Next Steps:

Why do you think both stories above involved women?

When sharing her story with a group of female aviators, Jessica from Story B noted that she felt people need to know that this is not appropriate to say, especially to a female pilot, and while the company is trying to encourage more female pilots to apply for the job, they still hire *qualified* pilots. These female pilots are there because of their skills and not their gender. A colleague countered that people DO know it's not appropriate to say, but they say it anyway, because of their gender bias. If Jessica's colleague is correct, what are some ways in which we can work to break down these biases and help everyone in the organization understand the value of hiring a diverse set of skilled workers?

Apart from the usual sexual comments and accusations of gaps in skill, what are some other challenges that women in aviation may face as a result of their gender? What systems can be set up to support women in our aviation workplace?

As an ally, you have an important role to play. Speaking up can be uncomfortable, but it's important! What could you say (and to whom), or what could you do, if you overheard a scenario like the ones in the stories shared above?

Even before scenarios like this unfold, they can be prevented.

- If you are in a hiring or training role in your workplace, what kinds of structures and strategies can you put in place to screen potential employees and ascertain their understanding of gender bias in the workplace?
- How can training be used effectively in your organization to eliminate gender bias?
- What is something your company already does?
- What could you do differently?

