

Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement of Women Pilots

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, the industry has focused on and identified actions needed to recruit, retain, and advance women pilots. However, growth in the number of women airline pilots has been slow, stagnating at around 5 percent. Therefore, the aviation industry must still make significant commitments and investments in this area. ICAO Assemblies have officially recognized that promoting gender equality is part of promoting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and contributes to greater diversity.

PILOT RECRUITMENT

Recruiting women as pilots is the first step in retaining them as safety professionals. Cultural norms, restrictive national laws, familial pressures, and socio-economic barriers all contribute to the ongoing challenges to attracting and retaining more women. Additionally, any hiring policies that discriminate against women are known as significant barriers to attracting women to this industry. Several challenges and opportunities have been identified:

- Fostering interest in aviation starts from an early age. In some countries and cultures, girls are expected to define their career paths during their early teenage years.
- It is critical to strengthen grassroots initiatives to inform aspiring aviators and their families about balancing career and family life. This includes addressing misconceptions, such as the belief that pursuing a career as an airline pilot means sacrificing having a family.
- Visible role models and mentorship from women pilots are essential to breaking stereotypes and broadening access.

- Airline companies should review hiring practices to eliminate unintended gender bias. This can include establishing gender-balanced recruitment panels and using validated psychological evaluations designed to be gender-inclusive.

Recruitment can be an exhaustive, time and cost-consuming activity. However, companies must understand the value of this investment, honor their role in pilot recruitment, and invest in hiring a more diverse workforce.

PILOT RETENTION

Investing in women and understanding their specific needs is essential to their retention. Including female pilot representatives in unions, associations, or other bargaining agents to bring these needs to the table is important.

Opportunities to improve retention of women pilots include:

- Flexible scheduling in the form of various flexible or part-time options for parents or primary caregivers of young children, roster bidding options to allow for childcare, and benefits such as sickness allowance for childcare, where no direct or indirect penalty to remuneration or seniority applies.
- Where available, fixed or semi-fixed pattern rosters could be explored, as they aid in predictability and allow for long-term childcare planning. Employees should be offered more than just the statutory parental leave and childcare benefits.
- Robust support from the organization and the establishment of relevant peer support programmes for those returning to flying after parental leave. Adaptive training for returning pilots, with the consideration of an existing career gap of several years.
- Loss of income due to part time, unpaid, or parental leave, especially in combination with the cost of training loans is a major factor that can postpone a pilot's choice to have a family. Exploring insurance options including leave with pay or an appropriate bond time and commitment to higher education should be considered.
- The responsibility of caregiving has historically fallen disproportionately on women, regardless of their occupation, often leading to lower salary or slower seniority progression. Support for caregivers and adapted rostering should be provided to all pilots when needed.

- Discrimination, harassment, and sexism from colleagues or passengers could occur throughout a pilot's career, starting from flight training. Establishing and fostering safe, robust reporting mechanisms, providing harassment prevention training, and strong employer support are essential to cultivate a healthy and inclusive company culture.

There are safety implications to retention, as experience and expertise cannot be fast-tracked. Therefore, retention should be supported through training and organizational culture rooted in respect, strong leadership, and continuous development. To foster loyalty, organizations must focus on inclusion and creating a genuine sense of belonging. Every employee wants to feel valued, acknowledged, and respected.

PILOT ADVANCEMENT

Organizational structures, particularly within training and leadership pathways, often reflect long-standing male-dominated networks that limit women's access to mentorship and advancement opportunities. In such environments, women may feel unwelcome or intimidated, perceiving leadership roles as inaccessible or reserved for men. The lack of visible female role models and active encouragement to apply for management positions further discourages participation in formal selection processes, ultimately hindering women's aspirations for career progression and reinforcing gender disparities in leadership.

Areas for improvement are:

- Professional development programs and pathways purposefully designed for women, incorporating inclusion/unconscious bias training for those in leadership roles, and mentoring/support programs that understand the specific needs of women and underrepresented groups.
- Career progression practices should be transparent, inclusive, and ensure that advancement options are available to pilots with caregiving responsibilities. These could include standards and training roles, management, recruitment, union representatives, technical pilots, SOP and professional standard-type committees, or peer support programmes. This represents a great opportunity to use the knowledge, operational experience, diverse skills, and unique experience of the individual pilot.
- Flexibility is the key. Companies should offer part-time rosters that are neither seniority-based nor rank based, and advancement opportunities should not be limited to fleet and rank promotions. The bidding options should be set in such a

way that they do not allow for direct and indirect discrimination, e.g., with regards to the rank, seniority, or full-time contract requirements related to career progression.

- Maternity uniforms for pregnant pilots and lactation facilities for breastfeeding add to the sense of inclusion, and should become a company policy, not a case-by-case occasion.
- Professional development and mentoring programs can aid with competencies and confidence building. A successful transition to command can be supported by pathways with adaptive training and mentoring.

Leadership opportunities for pilots should be made available in various airline departments and stakeholder organizations, including unions. Encouraging, supporting, and enabling women to step into leadership roles empowers diversity and inclusion and aids in retaining women in the industry. Furthermore, fair and transparent promotion processes through fleets and ranks, designed to eliminate discrimination, can support women's advancement throughout the industry.

POSITION

IFALPA calls for the aviation industry to actively recruit, retain, and invest in qualified, well trained women pilots. Despite decades of research identifying effective strategies, the proportion of women in aviation remains stagnant, showing that additional effort to recruit and retain women pilots is required.

The Federation calls for airlines and regulatory bodies to implement comprehensive, coordinated initiatives, including equitable recruitment practices, supportive retention policies, and transparent career advancement opportunities to build a diverse, inclusive, and sustainable pilot workforce. Investing in women pilots strengthens safety, enhances organizational culture, and ensures the long-term resilience of the aviation sector.

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