

Challenges Faced by Women Pilots

by Captain Jenny Beatty

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A young male pilot posed this question to the Aviation Career Mentorship Facebook group: “As a woman pilot, what disadvantages or obstacles have you encountered in aviation environment that male pilots don't face? Please give examples.”

Here is my response:

Ronald, I thank you for your question, and hope my detailed reply below helps you to understand the types of incidents that many (but not all) women pilots experience during their careers that are disadvantageous to them and hinder their career progress. These incidents happened to women professional pilots in the 30-year timeframe of the 1980s right up to this week of 2019 — to me and to many women pilot friends in The 99s, ISA, and WAI.

Parents say: You want to fly? Of course you can be a flight attendant!

School guidance counselors say: You want to fly? Of course you can be a flight attendant!

FBO introductory flight: Instructor does stalls and spins to try to scare you off and/or make you vomit.

Airport job to pay for flying lessons: Pilots of the majority gender work the flight line as fuelers, learning about airplanes, while pilots of your minority gender get stuck answering phones at the reception desk, or cleaning out classrooms and bathrooms.

FAA Designated Medical Examiner of majority gender says: Remove your undergarments so I can fondle - I mean examine - your intimate body parts as part of your FAA physical exam.

Air Force Academy says: Yes, you are the top-ranked pilot in your class, but pilots of your gender cannot fly in combat, so no fighter jet slot for you. But you can teach pilots of the majority gender to fly so they can go on to fly fighter jets, and then maybe become test pilots or even astronauts.

Air Force Academy classmates and/or squadron buddies and/or commanding officer of majority gender: How dare you think someone of your gender can join our elite pilot cadre! We will react to this affront by closing ranks, berating your gender incessantly, and sexually assaulting you.

Squadron buddies of majority gender: Let's take bets on who is going to be the first one of us to nail the isolated new pilot of the other gender.

Flight school instructors of majority gender: Let's take bets on who is going to be the first one of us to nail the isolated new pilot of the other gender.

Pilots of the majority gender boast and spread rumors that they had sex with you, when they did not.

Pilots of the majority gender gossip and speculate at length about your body and supposed sexual activities.

Corporate chief pilot of majority gender: Sure, you're qualified to fly this company jet, but the executives' spouses won't let us hire a pilot of your gender.

Jet charter chief pilot of majority gender: Sure, you're qualified to fly our jets, but the other pilots' spouses won't let us hire a pilot of your gender.

135 chief pilot of majority gender: We already have one pilot of your minority gender, so we're not hiring another.

135 chief pilot of majority gender: We previously had one pilot of your minority gender, and they didn't work out, so we're not hiring another.

Chief pilot interview: Are you married? What does your spouse think about you about applying for this job?

Chief pilot interview: Do you have any small humans at home? Do you plan on growing any new humans inside your body?

Chief pilot for family business with a couple of jets: You're hired! [One year later] We value you as a part of our family! [Two years later] You say you're starting a family, growing a new human in your body? You're fired.

At an airline's company holiday party, flight department managers put you in the spotlight to trumpet having hired a minority-gender pilot for the first time. As you walk back to your seat through the crowd, majority-gender pilots whisper: You were only hired for your gender ... We're gonna wash you out of training ... We're gonna hound you til you quit. Their spouses whisper: If you even dream of going near my spouse, I will claw your eyes out.

Company owner of majority gender: I prefer a pilot of your minority gender! Company owner, now your boss: I hired you to fly my airplane AND to have sex with me.

Chief pilot of majority gender: Pilots of your gender are only going to grow a new human in their body and quit, so we're not going to the bother and expense of hiring and training you.

Chief pilot of majority gender: Pilots of your gender are only going to get hired by X Airline, so we're not going to the bother and expense of hiring and training you. [You and many of your minority gender pilot friends are never hired by X Airline.]

Airline with pilots only of the majority gender: We can't hire a pilot of your gender because we don't have any pilots of your gender.

General aviation company: You're hired. [You're the one and only pilot of your gender for the entire two years you work there.]

Regional airline new-hire pilot class: You are the only person of your gender in the room for the entire six weeks of training.

Regional airline new-hire pilot class in which you are the only person of your gender: You are in the top 10 percent of the class in terms of flight time and experience, and other new-hire pilots say: You only got this job because of your minority gender.

Regional airline new-hire pilot training class where you are the only person of your gender in the room: Aircraft systems audiovisual training program ‘accidentally’ includes pornographic photos of people of your gender ‘to keep it interesting’.

Ground school instructor at a regional airline new-hire pilot training class where you are the only person of your gender in the room: ‘I bet I can make you cry.’

Regional airline new-hire pilot class in which you are the only person of your gender: You ace every test, but are told, ‘Prepare for your oral exam by bringing knee-pads’.

Regional airline new-hire pilot training, oral exam: Male pilots = 45 minutes; yours = 2 hours.

Major airline letter inviting you to come for an interview: Salutation is ‘Dear Mr...’, which is not the proper title for someone of your gender.

Major airline first phase of pilot hiring, group interview: A hundred pilots are there, but you are the only one of your gender. Also, there is only one non-white. You are not invited to the next phase of the interview process.

Ground school instructor at a major airline pilot training class where you are the only person of your gender in the room: I hope you don’t mind that I stare at your sexualized body parts.

Ground school instructor at a major airline pilot training class where you are the only person of your gender in the room: Instructor teaches the other pilots but will not look you in the eye, will not acknowledge you, will not speak to you, and will not answer your questions.

Ground instructor and new-hire pilot students exchange phone numbers to check in with questions and meeting times ... Instructor texts you repeatedly requesting dinner dates and sexual favors.

Simulator instructor debriefs your training partner of the majority gender ‘Good job!’ and debriefs you with ‘What’s wrong with you? You couldn’t get anything right. You’re falling behind. You’ve got to step up your game.’ You are astounded because you have been a simulator instructor yourself and know your training progress is normal. Your training partner is astounded because you performed better than them, but does not speak up in your defense for fear of jeopardizing their job.

Simulator instructor tells you it must be hard to learn a new airplane, since you are from a minority gender. At your prior airline, you were a check airman, chief flight instructor, FAA aircrew program designee, and Advanced Qualification Program manager.

Simulator instructor says it must be hard for someone of your minority gender to learn to be a captain. You have been a captain for over 14 years already.

Major airline health insurance: Covers annual exams of reproductive system and medication to restore function of reproductive organs for pilots of majority gender, but not for pilots of minority gender.

Major airline pilot uniforms especially designed for your minority gender: A business suit traditionally worn by people of the majority gender but not people of your gender. Ridiculously large hat. Tie that no one of your gender normally wears, or knows how to tie, and when tied correctly, is so long it hangs down to your crotch. Pants have no pockets. Blouses are flimsy

and see-through. Epaulet holders are too short for epaulets. Pilot shirt front pockets are large and poorly positioned so that they start at rib level and tuck into waistband of pants. Leather jacket looks as if you took it from your daddy's closet. You and all the pilots of your minority gender spend hundreds of dollars out of pocket on tailoring and custom-made uniform pieces in order to look professional.

Airline policy: Pilots of your gender must wear their hair short or pulled back in a braid or ponytail. You and other pilots of your gender say: 'We want to wear our hair in other styles.' Airline isolating the presumed ringleader: 'We are initiating termination of your employment.' You: 'I protest; this is discriminatory.' Airline: 'You seem upset, so now we are sending you for psychological testing and notifying the FAA.'

Airline policy: Any pilot who discovers a new human growing in their body must report it. You report growing a new human. Airline response: 'Even though the FAA and your personal doctor think you're fit to fly, we are grounding you without pay until you no longer have new human in your body.' You: 'Now I have a new human at home and request a short leave of absence under the FMLA'. Airline: You did not work sufficient hours in the last 12 months [because we grounded you], so you are not eligible for leave under the FMLA. You are on unpaid personal leave and by the way, you have been losing and will continue to lose seniority.

Airline pilot union: Don't you come to us asking for Pilot Mutual Aid! Pilots of your minority gender who grow new humans have made a 'lifestyle choice'. Not like pilots of the majority gender who deserve financial aid for breaking multiple bones while skiing or motorcycling, and besides they are their family's primary breadwinners. You: 'I am my family's primary breadwinner.' Union: 'That's just not natural.'

Pilot union salutation in meetings, messages, and correspondence: 'Gentlemen...', which is not the proper form of address for someone of your gender.

Pilot union letter inviting you to a formal banquet: 'Pilots, wives, and guests...'. Most pilots of your gender do not have wives.

Cockpit escape rope panel door that must be opened on every preflight: Taped-in pornographic photo of the very intimate body part of someone of your gender.

Cockpit binder with weight and balance charts you must check on every flight: Pornographic photos of people of your gender.

On-board flight manual: Pornographic photos of people of your gender with your name inked in.

Pilot of majority gender pulls out a magazine to read in flight: Pornography.

Pilot of majority gender pulls out iPad to show you photos of a recent vacation and 'accidentally' shows you a pornographic video starring that pilot.

Pilot of majority gender tells a sexist joke that disparages your gender.

Pilot tells a sexist joke that disparages your gender with you as the butt of the joke.

Pilot says: 'Geez, can't you take a joke? This is why I hate flying with people of your gender.'

Pilot of majority gender: 'I can get Viagra at the pharmacy on our Mexico layover, wanna try it out?'

Pilot of majority gender says, 'My spouse won't have sex with me so I want to have sex with you.'

Pilot of majority gender: 'You're married? Me too, but mine says it's okay so let's do it!'

Pilot of majority gender: 'No spouse? Not dating? What are you, homosexual?'

Pilot of majority gender: 'No spouse? Not dating? If you need a f*ck buddy, I'm available!'

Pilot of majority gender: 'No spouse? Not dating? What you need are breast implants and a tummy tuck.'

Pilots Will Not Stop Asking You For Sex despite your acting cool and disinterested.

Pilots standing and chatting in a jetbridge for a crew change, where you are the only one of your gender, and one says, 'You have the best sexualized body parts on this fleet.' They all laugh, the chief pilot laughs.

Pilot of majority gender says, 'Let's have some beers' and after a couple of beers he suddenly reaches over and gropes your intimate body parts.

Pilot of majority gender says, 'I want to show you that picture I was telling you about, my phone is in my hotel room', then slams the door shut, slams you on the bed, and attempts to sexually assault you.

Pilot of majority gender invites you to enjoy an adult beverage on the layover, and you end up drugged and sexually violated.

Pilot of majority gender makes a 'casual comment' that is disparaging and disrespectful. It feels like the seven thousandth such micro-aggression, and you've had enough.

Pilot of majority gender: 'Why are you so upset? I attribute any emotion you might display to a gender-specific normal fluctuation of the endocrine system.'

Pilots of majority gender: 'Why are you so upset? I attribute it to your not having enough sexual activity, to your not having a sense of humor, to your having a chip on your shoulder, to your being bitter about events that happened long ago but no longer happen...' You: 'This gender-based issue occurred just last week.' Other pilot: 'There you go, playing the gender card.'

You decide to report it. You are not believed.

You decide to report it. You are suddenly washed out of training.

You decide to report it. You are fired.

You decide to report it. Your union Professional Standards pilot volunteer says, 'I know [name of pilot] and they wouldn't do/say that!'

You decide to report it. Your union rep says you're lying.

You decide to report it. Your pilot union sends lawyers to defend the guy who did it. Apparently the pilot suffers no consequences. Your union reps smear your name and reputation.

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The January 2019 new-hire pilot classes at two major airlines consisted of pilots of all one gender. Not the minority gender. Throughout the previous year, new-hire classes had 1 or 2 pilots of the minority gender.

For the nearly four decades you've been in aviation — and as recently as this week — pilots of the majority gender have been saying that pilots of your minority gender Have It Easy, You Are Getting Hired on the Basis Of Gender Alone, You Are Hired With Less Qualifications, Standards Are Lowered For You, You Are Taking Our Jobs, and That Is Not Fair, It Is Reverse Discrimination... said by pilots of the gender that still holds about 95 percent of pilot jobs. [FAA Civil Airmen Statistics for 2018: Of active ATPs, 95.6 percent are men. ISA+21 statistics: At the ten largest U.S. airlines, just under 95 percent of pilots are men.]

While there have been some improvements, reluctant compliance seemed to come only after EEOC or lawyers were called. And discrimination still occurs — it's more covert now — as well as harassment and even sexual assault. Daily micro-aggressions continue to accumulate. Substitute 'person of color' or 'LGBTQ' for the word 'gender' in any of the above, and it is the same or worse. Occurring at the early stages of a pilot career, the consequences are significant; lost opportunities, slower advancement, and loss of seniority and rank add up to millions in lost earnings over a lifetime career.

IF the person even stays in aviation.

At a time when the worldwide aviation industry is projected to need 790,000 new pilots [Boeing Pilot Outlook for 2018-2037], we cannot afford to deter, delay, or drum out any person who has the desire and ability to learn to fly. Our industry cannot afford to lose a single potential pilot.

What is our industry going to do about this, this last unspoken deterrence and obstacle to women and people of color entering pilot careers? So far the answer had been 'that's not still happening' or 'it's a tough career for everyone' or ... crickets.

Yes, this is all still happening, and yes, it has an impact, and now more than ever it is necessary — imperative, even — that we begin to discuss and address these particular obstacles that women and other minorities face in their pilot careers. We need to discuss this all together, openly, as adults, in plain language.

I thank you again, Ronald, for asking the question that got this conversation started.

Captain Jenny Beatty flies for a major US airline. After a decade of flying freight and passengers in general aviation, her airline career has included four airlines and positions as instructor, check pilot, and flight operations manager. She is rated to fly the DC-9, B737, B747, B777, B787, seaplanes, and gliders.