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Gender Diversity in Aviation: What Is It Like To Be In The Female Minority?

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Introduction

- Despite a global population that is ever changing and growing more diverse, diversity in aviation reflects minimal gains or changes over time.
- According to Women in Aviation International (WAI 2022) only 6% of professional pilots are women and only 30% of women were recorded in other careers in aviation. In an effort, to build upon previous research to further understand and improve underrepresentation of women in the aviation industry, this qualitative phenomenological study sought to bridge the existing gap in literature related to women in aviation by seeking the **personal perceptions and experiences** of what it is like to be a gender minority (female) in aviation. By conducting personal interviews with 10 women in the aviation industry, this research sought to bring awareness to women's personal experiences to understand **what it is like to be a woman in a male dominated industry** in hopes to enhance gender diversity in the aviation industry in the future.

Literature

Minority Status and Underrepresentation of Women:The definition of the term *minority* refers to a part of the population differing from others in some characteristics and often subjected to differential treatment (Merriam-Webster, 2021). The word *minority* can also be described as the smaller in number of two groups constituting a whole, which is applicable to this study.

Rebecca Lutte 2019 and 2021 workforce study report:To illustrate women's presence in aviation, in 2019 Rebecca Lutte published a workforce report about women in aviation to present data on the number of women employed in a variety of aviation occupations. Lutte's results revealed that women are underrepresented in almost all areas of aviation. Specifically, Lutte (2019) found that the largest gaps included technical operations and leadership positions. Her results emphasized the minority status of women in aviation by giving statistical data that only 3% of airline executives are women and only 1% of airline captains are women. Two years later, Lutte (2021) followed up with a workforce report about women in aviation "to update the data and track changes to determine progress made" (p. 5). Lutte (2021) determined through comparison with her 2019 findings "that little progress is being made in significantly increasing the representation of women in aviation" (p. 5).

Benefits of a Diverse Workforce : In March 2020 at the Airport Experience Conference in Denver, CO the World Director General for Airports Council International (ACI), Angela Gittens, emphasized the importance of gender diversity in aviation and the importance of attracting a competitive workforce. Gittens remarked that because the forecasted demand in air service will double and reach 19.7 billion by 2040, the aviation industry will require a large, diverse, and skilled talent pool from which to draw (Airport Council International, 2020).

Industry Recognition of Needed Gender Diversity: Because the global population is growing more diverse, company culture emphasizing diversity and inclusion is a shared thought for many CEOs worldwide. According to the *18th Annual Global CEO Survey*, diversity and inclusion is at the top of the mind for many global CEO's. It was reported that 77% of respondents have a diversity and inclusion strategy or intend on putting one into place (PWC, 2015).

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has also recognized the need for gender diversity in aviation internationally. As a result, IATA launched the 25by2025 campaign which is a global initiative to change the gender balance within the aviation industry. The 25by2025 is a voluntary campaign for IATA member airlines to improve female representation in the industry by 25% or up to a minimum of 25% by 2025 (IATA, 2019). IATA's Director General and CEO Alexdre de Junia emphasized the importance of the initiative by explaining airline passengers come from all walks of life, different cultures, and different genders and the necessity of mirroring that image in the industry (IATA, 2019). In addition to international efforts and recognition of gender diversity, in April 2021, U.S. commercial carrier United Airlines announced its priority to hire a more diverse workforce to include women and people of color (United Airlines, 2021).

Research Methods

The research utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach to understand the common and shared experiences of individuals regarding the phenomenon in question (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study utilized reflexivity where the author as a woman with a career in aviation with over a decade of experience understands and is aware of her own experiences as a female in aviation but sought the experiences of other women in aviation. This research sought to understand more about what it is like to be a female minority in aviation. The research utilized purposive sampling. The population for this study consisted of 10 women with various careers in aviation that identified as gender minorities in aviation (Air Ambulance Pilot, First Officer, Captain, Airport CEO, A&P mechanic, Air Traffic Controller, Aviation Professor, Military Pilot, Corporate Pilot, Flight Attendant)

Research Instrument: The research instrument was composed of 3 sections: demographic, interview questions, personal comments.
Research Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were utilized to help understand participants points of views and personal experiences.. With prior consent from participants the researcher recorded the Zoom interviews and took extensive memos to later code for the results section.

Research Questions:

- What are the lived experiences of gender minorities (females) in aviation?
- Do the experiences of gender minorities in aviation contribute to the lower number of women in aviation?

Analysis

This research utilized a reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is an easily accessible and theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Selected Results

Barriers and Supports in Aviation

Theme 1: Feelings of Always Being Outnumbered

Theme 2: Lack of Career Advancement Regardless of Qualifications

Theme 3: Motherhood/Lifestyle Associated with a Career in Aviation

Theme 4: Gender Barriers and Biases in Aviation and Unconscious Biases

Open codes	Appearance across data set	Category
Only woman	40	Feelings of Always Being Outnumbered
Representation	29	
Men	25	
Culture	15	
Obstacles	10	
Intimidation	8	Lack of Career Advancement/Opportunities Regardless of Qualifications
Qualification	22	
Experience	20	
Network/Networking	20	
Mentorship/Role Models	18	
Leadership	18	Motherhood/lifestyle Associated with a Career in Aviation
Children	19	
Family	16	
Lifestyle	15	
Time/Involvement	15	
Schedule	10	Gender Barriers and Biases in Aviation
Balance	5	
Experience	36	
Stereotype(s)	18	
Interaction(s)	15	
Women in Aviation	14	Underrepresentation
History	10	
Environment	7	

Experiences within School, Training, and Career

Theme 1: Women Must Constantly Prove Themselves

Theme 2: Underrepresentation

Open codes	Appearance across data set	Category
Mistakes	34	Women Must Constantly Prove Themselves
Fairness	22	
Blamed	20	
Out work	15	Underrepresentation
Singled out	22	
Identity	20	
Alone	20	
Women in Aviation	18	

What Personality Traits Do You Think Women in Aviation Must Possess to be Successful?

When asked the question about successful personality traits, participants gave the following answers: self-confidence, grit, patience, self-motivated, perseverance, tenacious, calculated, ability to multitask, etc. All participants explained to some degree that successful women in aviation must be self-confident, driven, tough individuals, who don't take things personally.

How Would You Summarize What It Is Like to be a Gender Minority in Aviation?

All ten women interviewed recognized gender disparity in aviation and how it has affected their experience in the industry. Participants explained that they are gender minorities in every aspect and division of their jobs and industry including but not limited to their peers, colleagues, bosses, co-workers, management, etc. Every participant gave an explanation or multiple personal experiences during their interviews of always being outnumbered on more than one occasion during their experience in aviation. Participants believe it is not ideal being the minority, but eventually it is something they have gotten used to over the course of their careers.

Do You Have Any Suggestions of How to Better Diversify the Aviation Industry?

Participants offered multiple suggestions when asked how to better diversify the aviation industry. The common answers that emerged from participants were the necessity to educate young girls that a career in aviation is possible, the presence of more female role models and women in leadership positions, and the visibility of highlighting women in aviation.

Conclusion

The aviation industry is at a critical crossroads due to its aging and retiring workforce. Both men and women will be needed to meet this demand. It is time for leaders, organizations, and stakeholders of the industry to embrace and commit to the challenge of understanding what it is like to be a gender minority in aviation and to make the appropriate industry changes to ensure a healthy gender-diverse aviation industry. It is time to help women feel less outnumbered, promote career advancement and opportunities for women, eliminate unconscious biases for women, promote women's visibility in aviation, and understand women's work-life/home-life balance. The future and health of the industry depend on it. It is the researcher's hope that the findings from this study can bring awareness of what it is like for women in all aspects of the aviation industry to help bridge the gender representation gap that exists.