

# **A post covid review of gender based underrepresentation and challenges facing female pilots within the UK aviation industry**

## **1 Introduction**

Equality grows in importance in the modern workplace and is something essential for survival (Ferla and Graham, 2019). It is imperative to have a diverse workforce as it can be beneficial for presenting differing perspectives, backgrounds and ideas (Casebolt, 2023). Women's representation in the workforce has grown over the last century however some women continue to be misrepresented in some occupations, and a gap can exist between men and women's awareness of workplace gender inequality (Torre, 2017). Men often have limited awareness of what some of the challenges for a woman might be with some considering this to be a myth rather than a reality (Schultheiss, 2020; Sengur, 2025). Within academia there has been growing attention in the fields of management, industrial psychology and human resource development around understanding the challenges faced by woman in the workplace especially in relation to upward mobility and there is very little known on the multifaceted considerations faced by woman looking to establish careers in male dominated areas (Germain, Herzog and Hamilton, 2012; Gedro, 2014; Yanıkoğlu, Kılıç and Küçükönal, 2020). A woman who wishes to pursue the work a man traditionally would, has been described as an '*unusual phenomenon*' (Marintseva, Mahanecs, Pandey and Wilson, 2022) and Davey and Davidson (2000) claim it to be an unconventional career choice. This can lead to perceptions of role misfit, poor motivation and be a threat to the power, status and authority of females (Mills et al. 2014; Kenny and Donnelly, 2020; Cook, Callahan, Pollet and Elliott, 2024).

Within commercial aviation men continue to largely dominate careers within the cockpit with figures in 2026 suggesting 94.2% of pilots are men (The Independent, 2026). This is not surprising as the profession of piloting is said to be one of the most gender incongruent fields of work which makes it very difficult for women to enter, be taken seriously and to be a success within the role (Lancia, 2017). Further figures from the Independent in 2026 showed only 5.8% of UK pilots were women (Independent, 2026). These statistics highlight current day struggles are still being experienced in the industry with slow to adjust cultures, gender biasing, poor gender inclusion strategies and visibility and poor

organisational resilience which is impacting on women's career expectations and experiences in the industry. As a comparison to illustrate the slow rate of progress with this issue, in 1974 it was reported by the Civil Aviation authority that there were 5,319 men in pilot positions and only 2 in female pilot position (Neal-Smith, 2016).

The industry has acknowledged challenges with the number of women they have in technical roles. They have attempted to address some of their shortcomings with targeted recruitment programmes, specialised pilot training schemes and opportunities however it is proving to be more complex than simply establishing gender equality and women's rights within their workforce. Some of the named initiatives remain limited and there is no significant growth in representation reported in the last ten years from analysis of CSR reports. Figures reported in Marintseva et al (2022) showed that out of sixty of the largest global airlines only seventeen airlines showed programmes linked to gender equality and diversity. This problem now leads to further challenge for the global airline industry through the creation of a shortage of pilots worldwide and airlines cannot fill positions quick enough against forecasted growth for the sector.

Work as a pilot is not an easy job despite it often being portrayed as glamorous and enjoyable (Bennett, 2006). The realities are that it is extremely challenging, poorly rewarded and presents several unique working conditions that are a constant battle around fatigue, managing stress and dealing with exploitative terms and conditions (Maxwell and Grant, 2021). Some airlines are better than others with their offer to employees. Working long, unsocial hours, varied and irregular shift patterns whilst dealing with jet lag and adjusting to varied time zones can be intense (Avis, Bor and Eriksen, 2019). The impacts of doing so can physically impact health with disrupted circadian rhythms, disturbed eating patterns and other bodily functions (Bor and Hubbard, 2006). Pilots often also need to regulate emotions, and it features as part of their training to deal with any occurrences that may happen. In recent years, mental health has become a big concern for pilots after some fateful aircraft crashes because of poor pilot psychological well-being (Bor, Eriksen, Oakes and Scragg, 2017). Additionally, strain can also occur with being away from home for long periods of time which can create tensions at home, lack of trust and lack of social support (Avis et al. 2019). They also can experience financial hardships and employment challenges including frequent medical exams, fears over losing their license, working erratic schedules and performance anxieties with having to continually deliver safe and responsible practice

when carrying many passengers (Avis et al. 2019; Yanıkoğlu, Kılıç, and Küçükönel, 2020; Marintseva, Mahanecs, Pandey and Wilson, 2022).

In this study we do not aim to establish a new concept as women's underrepresentation within pilot work is widely recognised and has been discussed by many international scholars see Bridges, Neal – Smith and Mills (2020), Dinçer and Yirmibeşoğlu, (2024), Perkins, Merola, Ghosh, & Aragon, (2024), Mosolena, Charles and Wilson (2025) and Efthymiou, (2026). Our aim is to provide an updated exploration of the lived experiences and voices of women pilots within the UK aviation sector since there are limited studies which have explored this area post – covid 19 within the UK. One of the most core empirical studies linked to this area was produced by McCarthy, Budd and Ison (2015) but it is now more than eleven years old. One would expect that changes will have occurred over this time to address some of the issues they identified. Coincidentally one of the authors of this paper has experienced some of the challenges mentioned first hand whilst personally training to be a commercial pilot.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **Women and Careers**

The discussion surrounding the underrepresentation of women within literature started from the early twentieth century and efforts to shatter the glass ceiling for women in the workplace has been fought for many generations (Germain, Herzog and Hamilton, 2012). Historically, the differences between men and women were considered as psychological and functional where men were mostly concerned with their job and building careers and women typically linked to care giving activities (Becker, 1981; Spiering, 2014; Ansari, 2016). This gendered depiction encourages discrimination and females have suffered as a result with a lack of opportunities in education, employment, success and advancement (Ansari, 2016; Nur and Rahman, 2023). As can be observed through this paper there has not been a huge amount of significant change and women are still reporting feeling overlooked, not being presented with the same opportunities as males and that they are having to work harder to prove themselves (Budd and Ison, 2011). Even when females have a good level of skills and education the additional burden of family responsibilities can impact on career

progression and as Acker (1990) claims childcare can often demand commitment at home from women rather than attending to their careers. If women do attempt to pursue careers establishing themselves and being taken seriously within the workplace and even more so when attempting to work in a male dominated work environment (Chua et al. 2016; Sarkar et al. 2019).

Studies which have focused on females working in male dominated industries have found that there are a range of barriers to females' employment, and their well-being see recent studies e.g. Hanna-Osborne, (2019) and Bridges et al. (2020). The barriers arise for several reasons with some including sociocultural gender roles, stereotyping and expectations alongside favouring masculine values and practices which occurs within organisations (Martin and Barnard, 2013; Nemoto, 2013; Bridges et al. 2020). What is accepted within organisations is also a contributing factor to how women may progress. Seo, Huang and Han (2017) found that the gendered social status associated with women could compromise the effectiveness of human resource development interventions which are initially developed to help them. Organisational culture can be a problem particularly in sectors that have large male dominance and where favouring masculine values and practices are given to some whilst disadvantaging others (Gorlin and Bridges, 2021). Organisations with poor work cultures often have systemic power issues or 'inequality regimes' as noted in Acker (1990). It can create poor working experiences for women linked to lack of promotion, harassment, sexism and inflexible working (Gorlin and Bridges, 2021). Some women will persevere with poor working conditions to try and 'fit in' within organisations however it can be a challenge (Cook et al, 2024). Bourdieu (2010) details how physical embodiment can be a significant enabler to fitting in with a culture and this is very relevant to the work of commercial airline piloting. It is suggested by Bourdieu (2010) that women without the same embodiment as men do not fit and disrupt the aviation culture. Walton and Politano (2014) found that women pilots often consider themselves to be on an equal footing with male pilots however when asking male pilots their opinion on women pilots their views were more critical and negative. Gorlin and Bridges (2021) note that because of such claims cultural change within aviation is needed to make any real difference to the experience of women pilots however, societal cultural changes are also required, and this is something that is very challenging and can only really improve based on generational shifts and ideologies.

How children are taught within the educational system can shape their view on gender and what careers they may have. Females are often encouraged to pursue career routes in care and nurturing such as nursing, teaching, care-giving but they are also considered to not academically perform as well in subjects required for aviation such as Maths and Science and this can often see them pursuing other career options because they do not consider they have the capabilities to pursue such a path (Lancia, 2017).

### **Acker's Theory**

As this paper seeks to explore gender dynamics within aviation, Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisation provides a useful analytical framework as it enables an exploration of how women pilots lived experiences, career challenges, and underrepresentation may be influenced by broader organisational structures and gendered norms within the UK aviation industry. Acker's theory emphasised that organisations are not gender neutral and that gender is embedded in the structures, processes, culture and everyday practices. She further claims that organisations actively produce gender inequality and suggests that the ideal worker is a man because they often are not burdened with caregiving responsibilities, can be fully available, disembodied e.g. no pregnancy, breastfeeding, menstruation or family interruptions and they are generally more competitive, and career focused. Acker's theory is flexible for adaption across industries, and it draws upon five interrelated processes in the workplace which are 1. the division of labour which explores established power dynamics resulting from divided labour markets, the family and state (e.g. inequity linked to recruitment, hiring, promotion, salary etc). 2. Cultural symbols and belief linked to dress, ideology, images etc. 3. Workplace Interactions – social structures and relations e.g. men to women, women to women, men to men. 4. Individual identities e.g. individual's thinking about, appearance, conduct, and rules tied to femininity and masculinity and 5. organisational logic conceptualising and producing organisations as gender-neutral, wherein jobs are available to all and jobs comprise abstract workers, void of domestic life and who are dedicated to the organization (e.g., being a woman and a mother compels a reframing of organisations as gendered and workers as bodied, thus furthering the hegemonic need to construct hierarchy in the absence of a gender) (Clark-Saboda and Lemke, 2023). In her later work,

Acker (2006) continued to conceptualise organisations as operating through “inequality regimes,” which are interconnected practices, processes, meanings, and actions that systematically create and sustain disparities in power, control, resources, and opportunities across dimensions such as gender, class and race. These systems are not fixed; rather, they are fluid and vary between organisations in terms of how inequalities are produced, maintained, legitimised, and made visible. This suggests that gender inequality within the aviation sector in this paper may reveal distinct organisational dynamics, offering a broader perspective on how gender operates within specific workplace contexts. However, Williams (2012) argues that Acker’s original assumption was grounded in more traditional organisational and career models. As workplace structures continue to evolve, contemporary organisations may reproduce gender disparities in ways that differ from those associated with traditional career pathways, suggesting the need to consider how gendered inequalities are shaped within changing professional contexts such as aviation. One criticism of Acker’s theory is that she claims gender inequality is structural and not individual. Some processes linked to Acker’s theory have improved with time whilst some others remain limited in relation to advancing change for women. Taken together, these perspectives position Acker’s framework as a relevant lens for examining how gendered inequalities are structured, experienced and potentially transformed within the aviation sector.

### **Women’s Role with Aviation and The Representation of Pilots**

Women have always featured or had a role within aviation and some of the notable successes are linked to the Wright brother’s sister, Katherine. Additionally, in the Second World War women pilots demonstrated their ability in Britain’s Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) although the many efforts of women were not recognised or acknowledged until later years (see Stepanski, 2012; Mills et al. 2014; McCarthy, Budd and Ison, 2015). Within aviation today many women now tend to be overly employed in weak structural positions focused on customer orientation e.g. check in or as flight attendants where they are often objectified to help lure and attract customers to using airlines (Harvey, Finniear and Greedharry, 2019).

Historically the role of a pilot and the occupational image discourse is something that most associate with men derived through the portrayal of images of pilots both in commercial and military aviation. This created dominant male discourses within aviation and the notion of '*built by men, for men*' thinking or the '*boys club*' which has affected the beliefs and action of aviators towards women (Gibbon, 2014; McCarthy et al. 2015; Bridges et al. 2020). After the Second World War many commercial opportunities for piloting were made available to returning airmen and women were actively excluded from the masculine culture of the profession (Pugh, 1992). Women were encouraged to take on their gender perceived duties such as care giving, education and service and denied authority from men whilst men returned to technical work (Mills et al. 2014). As such the role of the pilot was depicted as being 'man's work' drawing upon elitism, being fatherly, skilful and brave and the public often associated these things with the capabilities of a male (Ashcraft, 2007; Casebolt, 2023). This has a detrimental impact on females and as Bridges and Gorlin (2021) state a glass door metaphor occurs where females feel they can't progress to be a pilot because of this kind of stereotyping, gender-based prejudices and the exposure to strong masculine and misogynistic cultures where females are often not made to feel welcome or capable. An aircraft is an example of a machine which cannot determine the sex which operates it however and it is only the humans onboard who can. Bateman in (1987) who was a female pilot in the US air force made a very valid point linked to this area when she claimed that the right stuff has no gender as she tackled criticisms about females flying aircraft in combat missions.

Stereotyping is a bias or unconscious barrier in which people have preconceived ideas about something that consequently can affect their behaviour towards that individual or group of individuals (Casebolt, 2023). In the aviation industry common stereotypes are that "aviation is a man's profession" (Casebolt, 2023, p.18) and "male pilots are more skilled" (Anderson, 2013). If a female challenges this 'status quo' they then can be treated differently because of doing so. Ragbir, Rice, Winter, Baugh, Milner, Gupta, Valecha, Candelaria-Oquendo, Capps and Neal (2021) carried out a study where participants were asked to view images of pilots and rate them on the quality and then view photos of student pilots and rate their likeliness to succeed in flight training. The findings were that white male pilots were favoured, and female and ethnic pilots were less favoured (Ragbir et al. 2021).

This exemplifies that most participants felt that white male candidates would have better qualities as a pilot and were likely to be more successful in pilot training than women. This is a prejudice view against female pilots and likely to be derived from pre-conceived stereotypes who consider a pilot career as a male career. This notion is also apparent in employment advertisements.

In a study conducted by Tonkin (2021) it was discovered that on a social media platform, pilot employment was targeted at men and nursing careers aimed at women. This highlights the stereotyping that females face through advertisement and promotion of careers. Public perception can also be influential. Research from Anderson (2013) found in an online poll that 51% of passengers did not trust a female pilot however following on from this in (2022) a case study by the BBC found that a female fully qualified commercial pilot was still struggling with passengers doubting her abilities based on the sex she was (BBC, 2022). Whilst there have been some positive improvements in society based around gender and abilities this is an area where more work can be achieved. Some positive movements in the industry are present including diversity programmes such as Fantasy Wings which encourages and supports women and ethnic minorities with career development in technical areas of the aviation industry. The realities also are that the industry would train both genders equally as flight training and licensing processes are strictly standardised and both sexes would contribute and experience the exact same number of hours, checks and certification hurdles that a male pilot would. However, the realities are that the aviation industry would train both sexes equally to be able to carry out the position as safety is paramount to how it operates. Females would receive the same training as men and would also be expected to prove the same technical skill and knowledge level to fly an aircraft as men (Ferla and Graham, 2019).

### **Role models and mentors**

When a female decides to pursue a career as a pilot some of the planning, they may take to support this development is to seek role models or mentors and they may look for additional forms of support within their personal/social life. This is acknowledged within literature and studies have focused on the positive role mentoring can have in women's careers (e.g. Cosentino et al. 2021; Orser et al. 2012).

Role models can give inspiration and allow people to set goals to aspire to attain similar achievements as the people they look up to (Lockwood, Jordan and Kunda, 2002). However, the challenges in aviation are that there are not enough female role models out in the industry to be able to advocate for female representation in the pilot profession (Opengart and Ison; 2016). This limitation can make some females question the suitability of being able to do the role (Lancia, 2017). Mentoring is another proactive step a female could engage with however this is very similar to role models in that the best mentors can be the people who have walked in the same shoes as oppose to a male who may not have experienced any challenge or obstacle to his progression within the pilot profession (Opengart and Ison, 2016). Lutte and Morrison (2022) found from their study that women often felt deflated and isolated with the absence of female mentors/role models, and this was subject to the overwhelming male presence at recruitment and training stages of becoming a pilot with some females being the only female present. In efforts to address this problem the aviation industry has attempted to offer some mentoring platforms such as ALTA which supports female mentorship within aviation however there is still a need for more progression in this area and a greater range of role models and mentors is needed. Another suggestion to encourage females to consider careers as pilots is for parents and teachers of young girls to encourage these career paths and to support learning in science, mathematics and technology to help overcome some of the societal pressures often present when a female pursues what might be considered a 'non-traditional' role (Anderson and Pucel, 2003). Attendance from airlines at School, College and University Career Events, use of female guest speakers, female classroom examples and textbooks demonstrating female contributions are all useful to raise awareness amongst the younger generations. The message also needs to be promoted that if there is ambition to be a pilot it can be achieved regardless of gender (Anderson and Pucel, 2003).

## **Materials and Methods**

A qualitative based research approach was adopted, and some key informant interviews were carried out with six female flight deck crew based within the UK aviation industry.

It was felt that this was the most suitable approach as Olesen (2003) advocates that women's subjective knowledge can be effectively collected via qualitative research as this enables the expression of women's voices (Bryman, 2012).

The participants held a variety of flying positions including being Captains, Senior First Officers or as a Recreational Pilot. Participants 1 and 2 were in the position of Captain, Participants 3, 5 and 6 were Senior First Officers and Participant 4 was a Recreational Pilot. Of the Participants five of them were flying Airbus's either as Captains or First Officers and one was flying a Cessna as a recreational pilot. The selection of these pilots was purposive, and this sampling strategy was impertinent to identify and target individuals that were working in the position, had knowledge and could contribute to the topic (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan and Hoagwood, 2015). The small sample size is a limitation, yet pilots have large workloads and are often geographically dispersed which made some of the data collection process difficult to achieve. The research also had to be completed in a short time frame due to project deadlines and as such this is why there is a small sample size although it has created a solid basis for establishing further research in this area.

### **Carrying out Interviews**

Interviews were held over a two-month period from March 2024 to May 2024 and the interviews were carried out virtually using Microsoft Teams to aid the geographical disparity, scheduling and workload pressures that existed between the researcher and the pilots. A semi structured narrative approach to questioning was determined to be the most appropriate as this ensured that the list of topics that were intended to be covered were discussed whilst also enabling scope for further questions to be asked to enhance the depth of information gathered and to encourage reflection on life experiences (Blumberg et al. 2014). Before any of the research took place the research was subject to ethical approval with the institutes ethical review process.

## **Analysis**

After data was gathered from the semi structured interviews, thematic analysis was carried out to identify the key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The interviews were audio recorded and then manually transcribed alongside fieldnotes which captured details of the discussion and voice intonation to ensure a thorough understanding of the answers given by the participants. Initial coding was undertaken through repeated analysis of the transcripts; meaningful sections of data were identified and labelled accordingly. These initial codes were then systematically compared across participant responses and grouped into broader preliminary categories based on similarities and differences. Overarching themes were then developed to capture the most significant patterns relating to female pilots lived experiences within the UK aviation sector. Following this, thematic analysis has resulted in five overarching themes as outlined in the next section. Impactful direct quotes from participants were also selected to support the analysis in ensuring the narrative data from the participants were organised coherently and contributed to a detailed understanding of female pilots' career experiences.

## **Findings**

The analysis of interview data generated five key themes relating to the experiences of women working as pilots in the UK aviation industry: (1) gender discrimination and sexism, (2) work–life balance and organisational support, (3) fatigue and emotional labour, (4) lack of role models and mentorship, and (5) financial barriers to entry. While predominantly reflecting challenges, some participants also described positive aspects of their careers, particularly in relation to personal achievement and resilience.

### **Theme 1: Gender Discrimination and Sexism**

Our first theme was connected to gender discrimination and sexism. We found that all six participants reported experiencing some form of gender-based discrimination or stereotyping during their careers. These experiences ranged from subtle biases to more explicit forms of sexism from both colleagues and passengers.

Several participants described instances where their competence was questioned purely on the basis of gender. For example, one participant recalled:

*"I've had passengers look surprised when I walk into the cockpit, and one even chose to leave the aircraft because I was the pilot."* (Participant 2, Captain)

Others highlighted discriminatory behaviour within the workplace itself:

*"I had a colleague refuse to shake my hand when I first joined. It was clear he didn't think I belonged there."*(Participant 3, Senior First Officer)

Gendered expectations were also evident in comments directed at participants:

*"People have said to me that I should be at home having children instead of flying planes."* (Participant 1, Captain)

These findings suggest that gendered assumptions about the role of a pilot persist, reinforcing perceptions of aviation as a male-dominated profession.

## **Theme 2: Work Life Balance and Organisational Support**

Our second theme was based around work life balance and organisational support.

Five of our participants discussed significant challenges in achieving a sustainable work–life balance, particularly in relation to family responsibilities and organisational policies. Participants highlighted the demanding nature of pilot schedules, which often involve irregular hours, time zone changes, and extended periods away from home. One participant explained:

*"The job makes it really difficult to maintain any kind of routine. You're constantly adjusting, and it impacts your personal life a lot."* (Participant 3, Senior First Officer)

Maternity and family-related policies were a particular area of concern. Several participants felt that the industry lacked adequate support:

*“When I was pregnant, the support just wasn’t there. It felt like an inconvenience to the company.”*(Participant 5, Senior First Officer)

Another participant described the broader culture as unsupportive of family life:

*“It’s not a family-friendly industry. If you want children, you have to make sacrifices, and it can feel like you’re being penalised for that.”* (Participant 6, Senior First Officer)

However, one participant did note a more positive experience, suggesting variability across organisations:

*“My airline has made some improvements recently, especially around flexible rostering, but there’s still a long way to go.”* (Participant 2, Captain)

### **Theme 3: Fatigue and Emotional Labour**

Our third finding was around fatigue and emotional labour and we found that all our participants identified fatigue as a significant challenge associated with their role.

This was often linked to irregular schedules, long hours, and the physiological impact of crossing time zones.

One participant described the intensity of the workload:

*“You’re constantly tired. Jet lag, early starts, night flights—it really takes a toll on your body.”* (Participant 1, Captain)

Participants also discussed the emotional demands of the role, particularly the need to remain composed under pressure:

*“You’re trained to manage your emotions, but when you’re exhausted, it becomes much harder to stay sharp and focused.”* (Participant 3, Senior First Officer)

Feelings of guilt associated with time away from home were also common:

*“I do feel guilty sometimes, especially being away from my family for long periods. It’s something you carry with you.”* (Participant 3, Senior First Officer)

These findings highlight the intersection between physical fatigue and emotional strain, particularly for women balancing professional and personal responsibilities

#### **Theme 4: Lack of Role Models and Mentorship**

Our fourth finding found having a lack of role models and female mentors challenging. Four participants highlighted the lack of female role models and mentors within the industry as a barrier to both entry and progression. Participants frequently reported being one of very few—or the only—woman in training or professional environments:

*“During my training, I was often the only woman in the room. It can feel quite isolating.”* (Participant 4, Recreational Pilot)

While some participants had access to mentorship, this was typically provided by male colleagues:

*“My mentors were supportive, but they were all men. They haven’t experienced the same challenges, so it’s not always easy to relate.”* (Participant 6, Senior First Officer)

The absence of visible female role models was also seen as a broader issue for the industry:

*“If young women don’t see people like them in these roles, they’re less likely to consider it as a career.”*(Participant 2, Captain)

#### **Theme 5: Financial Barriers to Entry**

An additional finding was around the financial hardships women experienced when joining the piloting profession. The high cost of training was described as a major deterrent, particularly when combined with uncertainty around early career earnings.

One participant explained:

*“The cost of training is huge. You’re taking on a lot of debt before you even start working.”* (Participant 1, Captain)

Another highlighted how this may disproportionately affect women:

*“It’s a big risk financially, and when you add in the other challenges women face, it can be enough to put people off entirely.”* (Participant 3, Senior First Officer)

Participants also expressed frustration at facing discrimination after making significant financial investments:

*“You spend all this money to get there, and then you still have to deal with sexism once you’re in the job.”*(Participant 4, Recreational)

There were also some positive reflections in an additional finding with several participants expressing strong feelings of pride and satisfaction in their careers.

One participant reflected:

*“It’s an incredibly rewarding job. Despite everything, I wouldn’t change it.”* (Participant 2, Captain)

Others emphasised the sense of achievement associated with overcoming barriers:

*“Getting to where I am now has been tough, but it’s something I’m really proud of.”* (Participant 6, Senior First Officer)

These perspectives highlight that while structural and cultural challenges persist, women pilots also derive significant personal and professional fulfilment from their roles.

## **Discussion**

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of women pilots in the UK aviation industry, with a particular focus on gender-based underrepresentation and associated challenges through a post covid lens. The findings identified five key areas affecting participants’ experiences: gender discrimination, work–life balance, fatigue and emotional labour, lack of role models, and financial barriers.

While these findings broadly align with existing literature, they also provide updated, post-pandemic insights and highlight the persistence of structural and cultural barriers that still appear to exist within the industry.

### **Gendered Organisational Culture and Discrimination**

A central finding of this study is that all participants experienced some form of gender-based discrimination, reinforcing the argument that aviation remains a gendered profession. These experiences ranged from overt sexism, such as refusal of professional interaction, to more subtle forms of bias, including questioning of competence. This supports Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations, particularly in relation to gendered interactions and cultural symbols. The perception of the "ideal pilot" as male continues to shape behaviours and expectations within the workplace. Importantly, this study extends previous research (e.g. Marintseva et al. 2022) by demonstrating that such attitudes are not only historical but remain present in contemporary UK aviation contexts.

The findings also highlight that discriminatory attitudes are not confined to colleagues but extend to passengers, suggesting that broader societal perceptions continue to influence the professional experiences of women pilots.

However, unlike earlier studies that reported widespread distrust of female pilots, the data here suggest that while such attitudes persist, they may manifest in more individualised rather than systemic ways.

### **Work Life Balance and Organisational Constraints**

Work-life balance emerged as a significant challenge, with five of the six participants reporting difficulty managing professional and personal responsibilities. This was particularly evident in relation to family life and maternity, where participants described organisational policies as insufficient or unsupportive. These findings align with Acker's concept of the "ideal worker," which assumes full availability and limited external responsibilities. The structure of pilot work—characterised by irregular schedules, long hours, and global mobility—reinforces this ideal, making it particularly difficult for those with caregiving roles to fully participate without compromise.

While some participants noted incremental improvements, such as more flexible rostering, the overall perception was that the industry remains inadequately equipped to support diverse life circumstances. This suggests that, despite increased awareness of diversity issues, organisational change has been uneven and, in some cases, superficial.

### **Fatigue, Emotional Labour and Well-being**

Fatigue was commonly reported among participants, highlighting its significance as both an operational and personal challenge. The combination of disrupted circadian rhythms, demanding schedules, and high levels of responsibility contributes to both physical and emotional strain. Importantly, this study suggests that fatigue is not experienced in isolation but is compounded by emotional labour and external pressures. Participants described the need to regulate emotions while maintaining professional performance, even under conditions of exhaustion. This reflects the often-overlooked emotional dimension of piloting, which extends beyond technical competence. Additionally, feelings of guilt associated with time away from family indicate that gendered expectations around caregiving may intensify the impact of these demands for women.

This supports previous findings that women may experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion due to the dual pressures of professional and domestic roles.

### **Role Models, Mentorship and Representation**

The lack of female role models and mentors was identified as a key barrier by most participants. This finding reinforces long-standing concerns within the literature and is consistent with more recent work, such as Mosolena et al. (2025), which also highlights the importance of visibility and representation in shaping career pathways.

Participants' accounts suggest that the absence of relatable role models not only affects career entry but also influences confidence, belonging, and progression within the profession. While mentorship was available, it was predominantly provided by male colleagues, which, although valuable, did not always address gender-specific challenges. This highlights a cyclical issue: low representation limits the availability of role models, which in turn may discourage future entrants, thereby perpetuating underrepresentation. Addressing this requires not only

recruitment initiatives but also retention and progression strategies that enable women to remain and advance within the industry.

### **Financial Barriers and Access to the Profession**

All participants identified the high cost of pilot training as a significant barrier. Although this challenge is not unique to women, the findings suggest that it may interact with other gendered barriers to further restrict access. The requirement to invest substantial financial resources upfront, often through personal debt, creates a high-risk entry point into the profession. When combined with experiences of discrimination and limited support, this may disproportionately deter women from pursuing or persisting in aviation careers. While sponsored training schemes and airline-funded pathways have increased in recent years, participants' accounts indicate that these opportunities remain limited and highly competitive. As such, financial accessibility continues to represent a structural barrier within the industry. We did find some positive reflections from our participants who expressed strong levels of job satisfaction and personal achievement.

These positive accounts are important, as they provide a more balanced perspective and counter the risk of presenting women's experiences solely in terms of disadvantage. Participants described a sense of pride in overcoming barriers and succeeding within a demanding profession. This aligns with research suggesting that, while structural inequalities persist, women in male-dominated fields often develop resilience and derive significant fulfilment from their work. However, it is important to note that the presence of positive experiences does not negate the structural challenges identified. Rather, it highlights the complexity of women's experiences and the need for a more nuanced understanding that captures both constraints and opportunities.

This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it provides contemporary insights into the experiences of women pilots in the UK following the COVID-19 pandemic, an area that remains underexplored. Second, it offers qualitative, narrative-based evidence that foregrounds women's voices, addressing a gap identified in previous research.

Finally, by applying Acker's framework, the study reinforces the relevance of gendered organisational theory in understanding persistent inequalities within modern aviation contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Our research has provided a post covid evaluation of the challenges and hardships experienced by woman pilots who currently are employed in the UK aviation industry. We have found that women still are experiencing masculine organisational norms as detailed in work by Acker (1990) especially in relation to the 'ideal worker' ideology. Our study also suggests that there is slow progress being achieved within the industry towards addressing equal gender representation. It also appears that there is a '*leaky pipeline*' present where women are being lost or deterred from joining the profession at multiple points including recruitment and training, when transitioning after achieving their license and when looking to advance. This alongside structural problems such as having high training costs, irregular working patterns and inflexible work life balances can disproportionately affect women. This is not just a problem within the UK (as has been the focus in this study) but it has much far-reaching consequences across the global aviation community.

Areas of challenge appear to be present with the lack of appearance of female role models and mentors and with how the profession is promoted to young females with the ambition of pursuing flying careers.

The industry has acknowledged that the only way to address some of their challenges is to make women pilots more visible to help erase some of the historical perceptions society have with pilot's work being something associated to just one sex. This coupled with more positive generational shifts could show some movement away from gendered structural difficulties whilst also appreciating that having a gendered workplace with one gender in more proportion to another is still most likely to occur. Generational changes and ideologies may be the key to tackling some of the deep seated historical and societal attitudes to this profession and we are hopeful that gender in commercial piloting can be viewed equally in years to come.

## **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

Our study did have a small sample size which is not uncommon with qualitative studies however it may be considered as limiting the generalisability of this research. The study is also cross sectional, and a more longitudinal study would be valuable with more participants to reflect if there have been any changes in relation to representation and some of the challenges experienced in the industry by female pilots over a period of time. The study was conducted as an initial overview to identify what some of the challenges have been for female pilots in 2024 and to compare this to what has been documented in literature over decades of academic studies. It is the intention to carry out a larger scale study with female pilots and to establish if there have been any noticeable improvements or any declines in relation to some of the problem areas and to determine any positive movement from the industry. It is important to note we have detailed gender-based challenges relevant to UK employed female pilots and there could be variations with these areas due to differing cultures and organisational stances globally.

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