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## Women in Aviation: a Study of Insecurity

### ***Abstract***

Women currently play a crucial role in civil aviation, however, women occupy a weak structural position largely confined to lower (technically at least) skilled jobs. As a consequence, it is anticipated that women experience high levels of workplace insecurity. Drawing on data from a large questionnaire survey of European aviation workers, the paper documents widespread perceptions of income insecurity, employment insecurity and work insecurity. The paper explains these results along with the counterintuitive finding that the majority of women in the industry report happiness with their work.

### ***Introduction***

In the current era of civil aviation, one may be forgiven for assuming that women have always played a central role in the civil aviation industry. However, this has not always been the case (see Turnbull 2013: 16-17). Changing attitudes towards the nature of commercial flights and the increasing importance of service has led to a feminisation of cabin crew jobs (whereby emotional labour and aesthetic labour are increasingly valued). This change has at one and the same time opened up opportunities for women in the industry and served also to undermine female workers' dignity and professionalism (ibid; see also Mills 2002). Despite the success of Carolyn McCall, former CEO of easyJet, and Barbara Cassani, former CEO of Go, the European civil aviation industry remains divided according to gender with women commonly occupying customer service roles. Roles dominated by women such as customer facing ground handling and cabin crew are less well remunerated than the technical roles that remain dominated by men, e.g., pilots (see McCarthy et al., 2015) and aircraft maintenance (Foster 2011). Moreover, women wishing to enter male dominated professions, for example, those wishing to become aircraft pilots have formerly faced harassment and sexism (see Neal-Smith and Cockburn 2009; Davey and Davidson 2000) and continue to face obstacles such as a lack of acceptance in the role and stereotyping (see Germain et al., 2012).

The industry is somewhat self-aware of this continuing gap. To celebrate International Women's Day in 2018, UK airline Thomas Cook staffed a flight from Manchester to Gran Canaria with an all-female aircrew (Hampsen 2018). Nonetheless, only 4.3 per cent of pilots in the UK are women<sup>1</sup>, while data from the International Society of Women Airline Pilots indicate that the figure worldwide is not much higher, at around 5.2 per cent. And while 7 per cent of Lufthansa pilots are female, fewer than 6 per cent of pilots are female at other European airlines such as British Airways, TUI, KLM and EasyJet (Hodges 2018).

The gender composition of the European aviation workforce more generally reflects greater balance, with around 40 per cent of the workforce being female. However, due to the persistently gendered nature of occupations in the industry, the gender pay gap is especially large<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, women are likely to experience greater insecurity at work than men because they hold positions of lesser structural importance. Structural importance, or structural power (Wright 2000), is derived from a variety of sources, for example, a tight labour market in which the demand for a particular type of worker is greater and/or the supply of that type of worker restricted by requisite qualifications, experience, skills etc.. Consequently, airline pilots have a high degree of structural power (see Harvey and Turnbull 2012b).

Structural power is diminished by a loose labour market, where demand for a particular type of worker is lower and/or the supply of labour less constrained. Whereas an occupational group may be crucial to the operations of a firm, the disposability of staff within that group and ease with which group members may be replaced erodes the structural power of the group – as is the case for cabin crew in the airline industry. To be sure, whereas front line service workers in civil aviation, especially cabin crew, are often highly skilled emotional labourers (see Hochschild 1983) they do not enjoy a structural advantage as a consequence

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<sup>1</sup> <https://centreforaviation.com/analysis/reports/women-airline-pilots-a-tiny-percentage-and-only-growing-slowly-432247>

<sup>2</sup> For example, 72 per cent at Ryanair and 35 per cent at British Airways (see Topham 2018)

because emotional labour is not (and perhaps cannot) be quantified in the same way as technical skill (see Payne 2009). Moreover, female employment in the aviation sector and elsewhere has been harder hit by the crisis the global financial crisis than male employment. In the UK, for example, figures from the Office for National Statistics show that female redundancies accounted for 34.6 per cent of those made in the transport and storage sector between 2007 and 2011, (a sector wherein women occupied only 20.3 per cent of jobs in the industry in 2007, see Rubery and Rafferty 2013: 420). Consequently, we might anticipate wide-spread employment (in)security (Standing 1997) among female respondents.

### ***Security at Work***

The purpose of this paper is examine the attitudes of women to several forms of security, namely income security, employment security and work security (Standing 1997). Simply put, income security is enhanced through mechanisms such as a guaranteed minimum wage and comprehensive social security systems (Standing 1997: 9). The presence of variable pay heightens income insecurity, especially where this constitutes a high percentage of one's wages. Employment security on the other hand, refers to security in continued employment enhanced by 'protection against arbitrary dismissal' (ibid: 8) for example. Where one perceives that their job is under threat then we might expect to find a heightened sense of employment insecurity. Whereas we deal with each of these in the paper, our primary concern is with work security that concerns the nature of work and working hours in particular, i.e., whether working time is fixed or variable, whether there are regular and/or short-notice changes to working time, etc.. Work security is enhanced by 'limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women etc.' (ibid: 9).

Related to work security is work-life balance (WLB), commonly defined as an absence of conflict between work and extra-work activities, or satisfaction with the balance of commitments to work and commitments to extra-work demands (Adkins and Premeaux 2019). Key to achieving this balance is worker choice.

Wood (2016) reiterates the important distinction between manager-controlled flexible scheduling and worker-controlled flexible scheduling in terms of the impact of flexibility on the worker especially with regards to WLB. Flexibility must either be controlled by management or else by the worker, it cannot be controlled at one and the same time by both. Control over flexible scheduling is a key determinant of whether the outcomes of flexibility are advantageous or disadvantageous to workers. Not only has the global financial crisis had an enduring impact on the quantity of employment opportunities available but also on the quality of the jobs available. Reactions to crises in the airline industry typically focus on labour (Harvey and Turnbull 2009) and work policies are often introduced or amended to reflect the needs of management in response to a crisis. Work security is clearly an important precondition of WLB, and WLB is unlikely in conditions of work insecurity. A particular focus of this paper is the perception of work security and WLB among women and how these interact.

### ***Method***

The paper draws on data collected by a research project commissioned by the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and co-funded by the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: project reference no. VS/2013/0184). The primary data collection method used in this project was a large scale questionnaire survey. The authors of the subsequent report (Harvey and Turnbull 2014) collaborated with officials at the ETF in order to develop the survey that featured a wide range of closed questions on a variety of topics along with multiple opportunities for respondents to include qualitative responses, i.e., comments. The survey covered a broad range of issues linked to the employment relationship including pay, working hours, employee voice, insecurity at work, perceived safety of operations and management style. The survey was posted on Online Surveys (then Bristol Online Surveys) and the European Transport Workers' Federation officials that formed the steering committee for the research project promoted the survey to the members of affiliated trade unions. All potential recipients of the web location of the survey were suitable to participate, being civil aviation workers.

The survey was available between 12<sup>th</sup> February and 12<sup>th</sup> December, 2014 and 2315 respondents answered the English language version of the survey<sup>3</sup> (1987 of whom declared that they were members of a trade union). Responses were received from people born in 31 different European states (with a further 84 responses from workers based in Europe but born elsewhere). The highest levels of participation were recorded in Germany (with 116 respondents), Denmark (130), Norway (322), Italy (352), Sweden (385) and the UK (705). Thus the survey was comprehensive both in terms of content and respondent coverage. However, the majority of responses were drawn from national contexts wherein former 'flag carrying' airlines (i.e., airlines that effectively represented the nation under the former bilateral service agreements arrangements) and sizeable employers were either under significant competitive pressure and/or had implemented significant cost reduction initiatives that impacted on labour (and consequently influenced responses to the survey). We refer to this as the spatial dimension to the data whereby the geographical location of the respondents is highly instructive about what they report. We return to this point in the analysis.

Of the 2315 European aviation industry workers who responded a large proportion, i.e., 1033 respondents were female of whom 872 (85 per cent) were cabin crew, and 117 (11 per cent) worked in ground handling. In this paper we explore the realities of work for female employees of European civil aviation firms working in these two occupational groups, i.e., 989 in total (888 or 93.1 per cent of whom declared themselves to be a member of a trade union)<sup>4</sup>. The proportion of civil aviation workers who are members of trade unions across Europe is far lower, however, the experience of trade union members and other workers are unlikely to be markedly different because workers (whether members of trade unions or otherwise) will be subject to the same conditions. This argument would be more difficult to sustain in recent times because of the penalties imposed by airlines such as British Airways who threatened to withdraw the incentives of workers who participated in strike action in 2017

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<sup>3</sup> The data used in this paper reflect responses to the English version of the survey. The survey was also distributed in German, Italian and Spanish.

<sup>4</sup> Where relevant, these data are compared with data from male cabin crew and ground handling workers.

(see Ross 2017). Moreover, research indicates that the attitudes of trade union members and non-members are not significantly different (see Gordon and Denisi 1995), but such differences reveal more positive attitudes among trade union members with regards to job security because of the support structure afforded by trade union membership (Sverke and Hellgren 2001). Therefore, these data may belie the extent of insecurity among female workers in aviation more generally, which may be higher.

Of these respondents, there was a fairly even spread across age ranges, but the sample was dominated by respondents who were 46 or older (38.5 per cent, see Table 1). A small percentage of this group had worked for their current employer for fewer than 2 years (78 or 8.1 per cent, see Table 2), while the majority had worked for the same employer for 10 years or more (510 or 53.6 per cent). As we interrogate perceptions of insecurity, this characteristic of the sample is noteworthy because research reveals a significant inverse relationship between job tenure and job insecurity whereby those in long term posts are more likely to experience security than those in short term posts (Erlinghagen 2007: 191). Similar to the point made above with regards to trade union membership, a sample dominated by employees with a long job tenure such as this one might moderate the extent of job insecurity.

Table 1. Age range of respondents

Age range	No. of respondents	%age of respondents
Under 19 years	0	0
19 to 21 years	13	1.3
22 to 25 years	72	7.3
26 to 30 years	127	12.9
31 to 35 years	110	11.1
36 to 40 years	141	14.3
41 to 45 years	144	14.6
More than 45 years	380	38.5

Table 2. Duration with current employer

Age range	No. of respondents	%age of respondents
Less than 6 months	8	0.8
6 months to 1 year	25	2.6
More than 1 year but less than 2 years	45	4.7
2 years to 5 years	207	21.8
More than 5 years but less than 10 years	156	16.4
10 years or more	510	53.6

An important variable to consider especially when analysing pay is the nature of the employment contract. Of the 989 respondents whose data are considered in this paper, 598 (62.9 per cent) were in permanent full time employment and 306 (32.2 per cent) were in permanent part time employment.

It is important to point out that the survey was conducted in the wake of the global financial crisis and at a time when austerity programmes introduced by many European states were well established and their impact on employment widely felt (this is the temporal dimension to which we return in our analysis). As demand for civil aviation is particularly susceptible to economic fluctuation, whereby a downturn in gross domestic product is closely followed by a downturn in demand for air transportation (see Harvey and Turnbull 2009), airlines in Europe (as elsewhere) were implementing cost cutting initiatives that invariably impact on labour (see Harvey and Turnbull 2016). Responses to the survey also reflect the changes being introduced by management and impacting on staff. As one might expect, survey responses clearly reflect the economic and social context of the time, or the temporal and spatial dimensions of survey and its respondents.

### ***Income Security among Female Aviation Workers***

Our concern in this paper is with perceptions of security among female workers. It is useful to begin with an analysis of the pay. The gender pay gap is a perennial



problem with airlines emerging as among the worst offenders (see Topham 2018). However, the common refrain among those who have been labelled gender pay gap ‘truthers’ (see Williams 2019) centres on the gendered nature of occupational groups in civil aviation: men occupy roles that are more highly skilled and thus pay more. Controlling for the influence of occupational type (i.e., including only cabin crew), employment contract type (i.e., permanent full-time employees) and national institutional difference, we contrast the pay of male and female cabin crew from the four countries that supplied more than 300 respondents (i.e., Italy, Norway, Sweden and the UK). The findings are important. Whereas there appears to be little difference between the percentage of male and female cabin crew who are guaranteed €1400 or more per month in the Nordic states (Sweden and Norway) where social protections are greater, there is a greater difference in Italy and a statistically significant difference in the UK (see Table 3).

Table 3. Gender comparison of guaranteed income

	Italy (n. 123)**	Norway (n. 115)	Sweden (n. 187)	UK* (n. 477)
1400 euros or more (female)	13.0	93.0	93.2	20.8
1400 euros or more (male)	24.2	95.3	90.7	43.3

\*z test value of p. is <.00001

\*\*this figure reflects the number of cabin crew respondents from each national context and is thus different from the total respondents from each national context as presented above.

In addition, there is a statistically significant difference between the gross monthly income of male and female cabin crew in the UK with fewer than one quarter of female respondents stating a gross monthly income of €2000 or more in contrast to over half of the male respondents (z test value of p. is <.00001).

More than 17 per cent of female respondents stated that they worked fewer than 12 months each year and of this group 44.9 per cent stated that they were not paid for the time when they were inactive. Many comments made by respondents indicate that among those who were paid, the income was a basic

wage. This is important because of the widespread use of variable pay, with 63.7 per cent of respondents indicating that their pay included commission; overtime payments (39.9 per cent); and supplements for unsocial hours (37.4 per cent) and weekend work (27.2 per cent). Moreover, the pay for a single respondent might include several of these forms of variable pay making basic pay far lower than operational pay.

Respondents were asked to report changes to their basic pay over the previous 12 months. Whereas 38.8 per cent of respondents stated that this had increased, 29.9 per cent reported a decrease in basic pay. Assuming that basic pay for the remaining respondents has not changed, then this indicates a real terms decrease for an additional 30 per cent of respondents. As one worker put it, 'my basic pay has not changed and as inflation rates have not been considered by increasing the basic, I in fact have a decrease' (4866840<sup>5</sup>). It is unsurprising then that 54.7 per cent of female respondents reported that their basic pay was either unsatisfactory or highly unsatisfactory.

Finally, respondents were asked for their views of the adequacy of reward. The data reveal that fewer than half of female respondents agreed that their pay and benefits were sufficient to support: their current lifestyle (37.8 per cent agreed); and the short to medium term (42.5 per cent). As one might expect then, substantially fewer respondents agreed that pay and benefits are sufficient to support one's family/dependents (16.6 per cent) or that they would support future life plans (16.4 per cent). These data are broadly similar to the responses of male workers in similar jobs.

### ***Employment Security among Female Aviation Workers***

In response to the statement "My work gives me security" only around one half of female respondents agreed (55.2 per cent). Comments supporting these data focused on work "innovations" introduced at a particular airline or the

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<sup>5</sup> Online survey respondent number

uncertainty facing a particular airline. For example, comments made by crew from British Airways (BA) reflected the changes made at the airline that precipitated strike action throughout 2010. For example,

‘BA are constantly trying to change contracts and working terms and conditions’ (4867589)

‘BA as an aggressive employer are always eroding my terms and conditions, threatening my sense of security’ (4867604)

‘I am in permanent employment at the moment, but with the current situation within BA we, as a work force, are currently being phased out of our contracts, making way for the new contracts known as Mixed Fleet on different terms and conditions’ (4867654)

‘I feel BA wants to get rid of its old crew as we're too expensive so any opportunity to fire us is taken and we have no trust in our future’ (4867677)

‘Although BA has always been seen to be a secure employer, with the new mixed fleet working under different conditions and pay structures, employees on the old contracts now feel insecure as to how long they're jobs and conditions can continue for’ (4867716)

There was a broadly comparable response by male workers with 48.8 per cent of male cabin crew and ground handling workers agreeing that their work gave them security. Moreover, many respondents from BA stated their concerns about the impact of the new low cost Mixed Fleet labour force.

‘At BA there is a new fleet and my current fleet will be starved of work and I have no opportunities for promotion within my current role’ (4867591)

‘Since British airways introduced Mixed Fleet, my job is threatened by this fleet as they are taking all the routes I operate little by little. Therefore in 5 or 10 years time I will be left with no work. The option is to join this mix fleet, but I'll have to change my contract and take a massive pay cut. So, no I don't feel secure in my job anymore’ (4867623)

Concerns were also expressed about the future of the airline by female respondents employed by airlines experiencing a challenging financial situation, namely Alitalia and Scandinavian Air Services (SAS). SAS avoided bankruptcy in 2012 following agreement by trade unions to wage cuts of up to 15 per cent for its staff (Milne 2012). Alitalia was temporarily ‘rescued’ from bankruptcy by a 49 per cent ownership bid by Etihad Airways in 2014 (Bachman 2018), but was subsequently placed under ‘special administration’ in 2017 (Wissenbach 2019).

Around one third (32.2 per cent) of female respondents were employed on a permanent part-time basis compared to 19.8 per cent of male respondents. Quantitative data such as these often fail to reveal the full story, in this case whether respondents were able to express choice in the type of employment contract they held and if so why respondents chose such a contract type. The data indicate a diverse response with choice evident in some responses and an absence of choice clear from others.

It is commonly believed that a choice to work part-time is based on pull factors, e.g., in order to dedicate more time to family and social activities (see for example Walsh 1999). Whereas pull factors are reflected in some of the comments made by female respondents, e.g., 'need time for my daughter' (4866771), many comments made by female respondents reveal a push rationale for working fewer hours, i.e., that the nature of the work prohibited full time employment, for example:

'early mornings and late evenings in shift job forces me to work part time. I do not have [physical] capacity for working full time in shift job' (4866722)  
'Its too hard to work full time' (4866806)  
'The job is today, unfortunately, too hard to fulfil as a full-time employed. Physically and lack of sleep.' (4867108)  
'It is too much to work 60 hours/7days. It should be possible to work full time but is not anymore' (4866883)  
'The workload is getting too heavy for full time' (4867038)  
'The current working hours per month makes it impossible to maintain a full time employment' (4867155)  
'I chose "part time" because it is totally exhausting working full time with the hours and the schedule that we have. Even though I am young and do not even have a family, I am exhausted. And to have a variable roster like we do, gives us no chance to plan more than a month ahead. (4867187)

However, it was also clear that part-time work was simply unfeasible for others who felt that they had to work full time for financial reasons. Indicative comments include: 'The salary in this line of work is not very high so therefore I have to work 100%' (4866735), 'part-time would be great but I can't afford it' (4866872) and 'cannot afford to work part-time nowadays – too bad salary' (4866792). This diverse response suggests that female staff in the industry find

themselves in a very difficult position of not wanting to work full-time because of the work related pressures, but working full-time nonetheless because of the financial pressures that make part-time work unfeasible. These comments are echoed by male workers, for instance, 'Cannot afford to go part-time at the moment' (4867957), and 'Working full time is getting increasingly tiring and unsustainable as our working hours are increasing due to tighter rostering, and more occasions of minimum rest. Although I'd like to work part-time, a 75% contract is not financially viable as I have a family' (4868040)

### ***Work Security among Female Aviation Workers***

Work security is achieved through stability of work patterns. Fewer than half of the female respondents worked a secure fixed shift (42.3 per cent, a similar result was recorded for male workers), while 8 per cent worked split shifts (around 11 per cent of male workers carried out split shifts). Split shifts, whereby working hours do not run consecutively over a shift, but are as the name implies split, were the source of considerable discontent, and according to staff and trade union representatives, posed a potential threat to operational safety and security. An earlier study of work in civil aviation reported concerns raised by participants about the changing nature of shift patterns and the effectiveness of the worker to safely discharge their duties due to insufficient rest. Harvey and Turnbull (2012: 40) write, 'At one airport it was not uncommon to find temporary workers sleeping in their vehicles in the airport car park between shifts, rather than travelling home because of the limited turnaround time available between shifts' (see also Harvey et al., forthcoming). Far more common for female (and indeed male) workers were variable shift lengths whereby the number of hours worked each shift was not fixed, but determined by demand. Around 52 per cent of women (and 47 per cent of men) reported working variable shifts.

As for cabin crew, a large majority of female respondents reported flying between 3 and 5 sectors (i.e., one sector involves take-off, flying time and

landing) in a shift (48 per cent), with around 12 per cent flying 5 or more. Interestingly, it was far less likely for male respondents to fly more than 5 sectors in a shift (7.5 per cent), with the majority (48.8 per cent) flying fewer than 3 sectors in a shift. This indicates that female cabin crew are more likely to be flying shorter and arguably more stressful sectors. Whereas a higher number of sectors per shift suggests that service duties for cabin crew are limited, for example, shorter routes have no meal service, it also means that cabin crew must embark and disembark passengers (they are also often required to clean the cabin) several times. This procedure is important and stressful for staff because many airlines rely on a quick turnaround in order to be profitable and so staff are under considerable and continued pressure to be efficient.

Work insecurity can also be caused by the rearrangement of shifts at short-notice. A high proportion of female respondents (44.1 per cent) stated that they were usually given less than 24 hours notice for changes to their roster, while a further third (34.3 per cent) state they were usually given between 24 and 48 hours notification of a change (the figures are broadly similar for male respondents). Although changes might be made at short notice to work rosters by management, many respondents (male and female) felt that it was impossible to make a change to one's own roster (38 per cent of female respondents and 30 per cent of male respondents).

Due to the seasonal variability in demand for low fares airlines (see Harvey and Turnbull 2012: 19), with demand peaking in the summer and dropping considerably in the winter, employees work intensity reflects these demands. One quarter of female respondents stated that there was 'considerable seasonal variation in the number of work days per month' (with 22 per cent of male respondents reporting seasonal variation in their working time). The comments confirm the loading of work in the summer months, for instance: 'Working 8 weekend during summer' (4866632), 'Work a lot harder during summer. All shifts 10-15 h' (4866806); 'always split shift in the summer' (4866722); and 'enforced layoffs during spring/fall' (4866812).

Understandably then, only around 30 per cent of female and male respondents felt that their work gave them work-life-balance (WLB). One female respondent expressed the arduous demands of work in this way: 'difficult to find a balance in this job, working nights, early flights, long working days up to 14 hrs, also on holidays without extra financial compensation, minimum salary is very low so if you are ill its financially very difficult' (4866736). Research shows that choice of or control over working time has a positive impact on the experience of work (see for example, Moen et al., 2011) and that an absence of control leads to negative outcomes (Lyness et al., 2003; Wood 2016). More succinct appraisal of the situation facing female staff in aviation focused on the importance of choice in their perception of WLB, for example:

'If you cannot choose anything there's no balance in your life (4867485),  
'There is no choice about length of trips or choice of trips, so it is impossible to make any plans' (4867629)  
'I have very little control over my working roster or my time off' (4868663)  
'We do not even get to switch duty periods with each other. Neither does the company listen to our roster requests. We do not have the smallest chance of having a life of our own. The company owns us.' (4867187)

One respondent commented that the desire for WLB has come at a financial cost so great that she was consequently seeking ancillary employment:

'In order to achieve a better work/life balance I have had to become part time as we are rostered to basic legal requirements meaning that days off are purely for recovering from jetlag and do not provide quality family time. I now get much more useful time with my family but am struggling even more financially and looking for a second part time job' (4868401).

These data offer a much needed insight into the contribution women play within civil aviation and the challenges that they face and ultimately paint a bleak picture of women's work in the industry. Counterintuitively, 60 per cent of female respondents agreed with the statement 'I am happy with my type of employment' (while 54.3 per cent of male respondents also agreed). As we state above, this response is likely to have been influenced by context, namely the dire state of the economies and levels of unemployment in many European states at that time. For instance, one respondent expressed relief at being employed full time: 'Very happy to be full time on a permanent contract' (4867764). Others

acknowledged the benefit of having a job at a time when employment opportunities were becoming increasingly scarce, but also reiterated the points made by others regarding the pressures of full time employment, for example: 'Happy that I am permanent and full time however worked WAY to (sic) hard (emphasis in original, 4868510); and 'Happy to be full time, but full time is too much!' (4867873)

Moreover, despite the challenges of insecurity coupled with emotional and aesthetic demands of customer service work, aviation is still deemed an appealing industry to work in especially in a time of austerity when the alternatives are perceived to be so much worse. Several respondents explained their happiness with their type of employment in relative rather than absolute terms, whereby happiness is a reflection of the possible alternatives. Several respondents explained their happiness in relation to their continued employment by an airline rather than by a subcontractor with whom terms and conditions of employment would be far worse. As one respondent put it, '...I am happy to be employed directly by SAS [Scandinavian Air Services, airline], and not through an agency' (4867965). The context of data collection for this study is critical so that these data are not misunderstood. That a majority agreed with the statement 'I am happy with my type of employment' may be a reflection of the temporal location of the survey (i.e., that is was carried out 7 years after the start of the global financial crisis when the consequences of the cost reduction measures implemented by civil aviation companies in response to the crisis had been witnessed is not personally felt. Response to this question may also reflect the spatial location of respondents, many of whom were based in Italy, Norway, Sweden and the UK where major employers such as Norwegian Air, SAS, Alitalia and BA had implemented significant cost reduction measures that impacted on staff (see, for example, Harvey and Turnbull 2014). One must be cautious then in reading this response as an indication of a positive experience of work.

### ***Discussion and conclusion***



Our purpose in this paper has been to explore the nature of women's work in the civil aviation industry. We focus on forms of security and argue that the gendered nature of work in the industry means that women commonly occupy lower skilled and less structurally important jobs, and as a consequence are more likely to experience insecurity in their work. In particular, we focus on income insecurity, employment insecurity and work insecurity. We draw on data collected as a part of a comprehensive study of employment relations in the European civil aviation industry.

The findings presented in this paper support our assertion that perceptions of insecurity would be widespread among female workers. Whereas cabin crew and other customer facing work (where female workers are most likely to be located) requires high competence in emotional labour, emotional labour is not considered a skill in the same way as the technical skill of a pilot. Consequently, the majority of female workers in our study derive limited structural power from their occupation. We explore dimensions of insecurity among female workers and as anticipated, we find that perceptions of income security, employment security and work security were limited within our sample.

The data analysis also reveals interesting ancillary findings. First, qualitative data reveal what is for some the paradox of part-time work. Where choice of an alternative contract was possible, that choice was constrained. For example, respondents in full time employment claim that the job had become simply too arduous, and yet whereas they might opt for part-time work, they felt that they could not do so because of the financial implications – it was simply not feasible to survive on the part-time wage offered. Others commented that they would like a different contract, either full-time or part-time or part-time of full-time, but were unable to change. With an ever increasing work intensity combined with income insecurity exacerbated by part-time working, women's work in civil aviation exemplifies the idiom 'damned if you do and damned if you don't'.

Second, the data provide evidence of the gender pay gap that is skewed within airlines because of the high proportion of male pilots who earn significantly

more than other occupational groups in airlines such as the heavily female populated cabin crew. However, data from the UK clearly shows a statistically significant difference between the pay of men and women in civil aviation after controlling for the type of job and type of contract. The data indicate that women in the industry are significantly more likely to have both a lower guaranteed income and a lower gross monthly income than men.

Finally on the findings, whereas the data reveal widespread work insecurity and income insecurity among women in the industry, a large proportion report happiness with their type of employment. It is worth underlining here that despite consistently reporting insecurity at higher or similar levels than their male counterparts, the women reported considerably more 'happiness'. As noted in the introduction, the context of the survey is extremely important for understanding this finding. The dual forces of economic tribulation in many European states and the economic strife faced by many European airlines in the years leading to 2014 (i.e., the year in which the survey was conducted) help to understand why it is that the majority of female respondents stated that they were happy. The scarcity of alternative employment opportunities in the various European states and the increase in the use of contracts with lower terms and conditions within the industry indicate a relative happiness as opposed to happiness in absolute terms.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, and two in particular. First and foremost, the survey was publicised through trade unions affiliated to the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF). The ETF does not represent all trade unions with members working in civil aviation. Slightly more than 10 per cent of respondents were not trade union members, however, the survey was dominated by members of trade unions affiliated to the ETF. Second, whereas civil aviation workers from across Europe participated in the study, large numbers responses from several national contexts, namely Italy, Norway, Sweden and the UK comprised the majority of data. The response by workers in other European states, especially Germany and France, was far lower. Notwithstanding, these data offer an invaluable insight into how women in the

civil aviation industry perceive their work and understand their choices, which will prove useful for further studies of the gendered nature of employment.

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