



WHY DO GIRLS THINK THEY CAN'T BE AIRPLANE PILOTS?

News / Airlines



On boarding a BA flight to Finland in December, my four-year-old daughter was invited into the cockpit to look around. Thrilled, as she loves to fly, Antonia marvelled at the flashing buttons and levers, astounded and more than a bit suspicious that there was no actual steering wheel.

And yet, when I asked her recently if she'd like to be a pilot when she grows up, she sniffed: "I'd rather be a flight attendant, looking after the passengers."

She's not alone; the majority of girls seem to see flying an airplane as outside of their gender's remit.

BA counter at KidZania

BA counter at KidZania CREDIT: JEFF GILBERT

To wit: in the six months since KidZania, the children's work-themed amusement park, opened in London 32,500 children have been through BA's Aviation Academy. While 10,352 children have trained to be cabin crew – which involves performing a safety demo and wheeling a drinks cart up and down an airplane aisle, more than twice as many - 22,642 – have tried their hand at being a

pilot, using nifty flight simulator video games. And that number was made up of almost twice as many boys as girls (14,765 vs 7,877).

Why are girls averse to being pilots?

A poll conducted last year by British Airways found that, while many boys dreamt of being a pilot when they grew up, nearly two-thirds of girls said they were put off the career because they thought it was "only a job for men".

Asked where they got that idea, one in five girls cited the lack of women playing pilots in film and television, and just over one in 10 said they'd never heard or seen a woman pilot while taking a flight; another one in 10 said they'd been told by adults that piloting was a man's job.

BA has (by a small margin) the highest number of women pilots (242 vs 3,764 male pilots) of any UK airline; six percent of BA's pilots are women, as opposed to the international average of five per cent. So far, so segregated.

By contrast, men make up one third of BA's cabin crew – a job where there have been increased signs of gender equality; for example, female cabin crew for a small division of the business recently celebrated a victory in a two-year dispute over the right to wear trousers.

Despite these changes, it is striking that so many girls don't see a place for themselves in aviation, even in a make-believe world like KidZania. The industry periodically promises to focus on recruiting more women: last year Carolyn McCall, chief executive of easyJet, said that the budget carrier intended to double its female pilot intake, from six per cent to 12, by 2017.

But this doesn't seem to be working quickly enough. Faced with these stark statistics, I wanted to get to the bottom of why my daughter wasn't interested in being a pilot, despite the allure of the cockpit when she visited. "I don't like sitting still." Very true.

I pointed out that the average pilot earns many times more than a flight attendant (according to [payscale.com](https://www.payscale.com), while an entry-level pilot could expect an average salary of £67,000. first-time flight attendants may be offered as little as a sixth of that). Obviously, there's the cost in time and money of pilot training to consider, but still, I suggested, if you became a pilot, you'd have a bigger house.

Her interest was piqued: "How much less are flight attendants paid? And how is that fair, if the flight attendants are keeping everyone safe?" I explained the relative length of training required, but she wasn't having it. She's clearly another willing recruit to Anne-Marie Slaughter's campaign to elevate the value our society places on caring.

And training times aside, my daughter – and Slaughter – are right; safety and care should be high on everyone's agenda, and this should be reflected in remuneration.

Is it just child's play?

But my daughter isn't intimately acquainted with airline statistics. So is the aversion that she and other girls show to taking control of an airplane simply a product of gender-stereotypes from within the industry, which has a long history of sexism, or is it from their own lives?

"Children look around them for cues about what's suitable for boys and girls, and unfortunately toys and toy marketing often give them pretty narrow ideas about what's on offer to them," explained Tricia Lowther, a campaigner from the gender equality group Let Toys Be Toys, who sees a clear connection between early childhood and later ambition.

"When boys grow up seeing items like aeroplanes on their clothing and male pilots in toys, books and media, it's not surprising that they would feel more comfortable than girls taking on the role of pilot. Girls are much more likely to be seen as assistants – see, for example, the Lego Friends Heartlake Airport set which has three mini dolls - Stephanie the passenger, Sandra the flight attendant and David, the pilot.

Lowther added: "Even when there are great inspiring female role models, they often go missing from toys and merchandising - look at Rey from Star Wars, who pilots the Millennium Falcon in the film, but is missing from play sets.

"When children, and their parents, get the marketing message from their earliest days that boys and girls need different clothes and toys, it's no surprise that they grow up thinking that there are 'right choices' for boys and girls."

The future

Whatever the culprit – and I think it's a combination of a male-dominated industry, impractical hours, and gender-stereotypical toys – I'd like to see change. After years of discrimination, male flight attendants no longer raise an eyebrow. Long before my four-year-old is eligible to take her pilot's test, I hope that the chance of having a woman piloting her airplane is more than one in 20.

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