

Female pilots: The sky should never be the limit. A view from FedEx

Circling the globe, transporting cargo as precious as a human heart, as adorable as a pair of pandas or as irreplaceable as Catherine the Great's favorite jewel encrusted icon, the women pilots of FedEx are quite accustomed to moving rarities from one place to another. It's the business they're in, and they love it. At the same time, there is one thing they wish were a bit less special about their job - being a woman in a pilot's uniform.

Worldwide, it's estimated that no more than six percent of pilots are female. That's changing for the better, but slowly.

A lack of awareness that a seat in the cockpit is even an option, women pilots say again and again, is perhaps the biggest single obstacle to more women with wings. Not that there aren't other challenges, of course. Night shifts, long absences and erratic schedules can pose an additional challenge to home life but this is all part of the juggling act that working parents in many industries have to circumnavigate.

For example, FedEx pilot Susanne Brunis a mother to an eight-year old boy. Captain Brun believes there are ways for parents, and especially mums, to fly and still be around to have quality time with their children. In fact, she believes her career choice gives her an advantage over other professions in that she is able to spend quality time with her son when she is off duty, rather than a few hours here and then.

Molly Boss, a FedEx pilot based in the Hong Kong hub, believes it's a positive thing that women have started to make their mark on this profession because they often have different skillsets which are complementary to their male counterparts in the cockpit.

Women are not new to aviation. The Wright Brothers first flew in 1903, and by 1910 Raymonde de Laroche of France became the first woman in the world to earn a pilot's license. That same year, Bessica Medlar Raiche became the first American woman to solo. In 1932, 80 years ago, legendary pilot Amelia Earhart completed the first solo flight by a woman across the Atlantic. She would disappear, tragically, in 1937, on an around-the-world flight. She and so many others remain inspirations for women who fly or dream of it. Today, Women in Aviation, International (WAI) has more than 9,000 members, including corporate professionals throughout the industry, students, enthusiasts – and pilots.

It is a legacy the women pilots of FedEx say they are proud of and determined to continue, with most saying they feel a real sense of mission to spread the word to as many young women as possible so that they too can lift-off. When it comes to women and flying a plane – the sky should never be the limit.

Q&A with Molly Boss FedEx Pilot since 2011, Hong Kong Hub

Did you ever feel held back as a woman?

Honestly, I was so blessed to have the parents and the support structure that I had. I was never told no or that I couldn't do it because I was a female. It's interesting, because I hear the exact opposite from many of my peers. Even now, in 2013, I hear women saying that they still

encounter some resistance here and there. But I flight instructed, I flew charter, I did air ambulance, the whole airline thing. There's been an instance or two regarding my gender that were totally isolated, and not from coworkers, but, by and large, I've had nothing but positive experiences. If anything, people are just fascinated that, well, here's this woman taking advantage of all the opportunities that are available, instead of feeling like you can't do that because you're a girl.

It is still the case that only about six percent of pilots are women. What do you make of that?

The University of North Dakota has one of the largest aviation programs in the country, but only a small percentage of my female friends actually looked into being a professional pilot. A lot of them were more interested in "normal jobs" within the industry, management, or something office related. Something that would let them do the nine-to-five thing in the industry and still come home every night. Because they did want to pursue the family life, and it's hard to find that balance. Like I said, I was so fortunate to have the family I did. They never said "no you can't."

Do you think the number of women pilots can change?

Women have been to space. We've finally broken through the military constraints, and in the airline industry, from the corporate suite to flight instructors, women have been doing everything.

I think the important thing is just to keep encouraging women to pursue flying if that's their dream. Let make sure at least that women know that it's an option. I guarantee that if you polled 15 year-old girls, less than 10 percent would even think that they're allowed to be a pilot, which is surprising. Funny things can hold people back. I still meet people when I'm wearing my glasses who find out what I do and will say, "I didn't think you could be a pilot and wear glasses". There's a lot of misinformation out there that I think educational campaigns can do a lot to change, whether it's women already in aviation speaking up, or just any of a number of responsible organizations and corporations. The message just needs to be: "there's no reason you can't do this".

So what's the most important thing for any young woman interested in a career as a pilot?

I'm a little bit of a romantic. I would say if it's a male or a female asking about becoming a pilot, I would say the answer is if you love flying, absolutely yes. I mean, that goes for every career. If you don't love what you are doing then why are you doing it? It sounds very simplistic and perhaps it is, but I really believe that. I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't love flying.