



# Female wings in African airspace

Women are still the distinct minority in aviation professions on the African continent. **Maseka Kithinji** explored the reasons in her master's thesis written at Austria's Danube University Krems.



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In December 1903, powered aviation was launched by the Wright brothers. While aviation pioneers took the world by storm, the reservations that flying women faced grew just as quickly. Despite this, a few female pilots managed to break into the domain claimed by men. Harriet Quimby, the first woman to cross the English Channel in 1911, and the famous Amelia Earhart a decade later, are examples of those female aviation pioneers.

Women's interest in the aviation industry was not unique to the Western world, but was soon sparked in Africa as well. Two decades after the first woman took to the skies in Europe, the first female pilot conquered African airspace. Lotfia Elnadi was not only the first African, but also the first Arab female pilot. She acquired her pilot's license on 27 September 1933, after enrolling in an Egyptian flight school. After these initial milestones, the path into the cockpit for African women was led primarily through the military. In 1963, for example, Melody Danquah of Ghana was among the first three women to be trained as pilots in Ghana's national air force. Years later Asli Hassan Abade in 1976 from Somalia followed suit and became



Harriet Quimby



Amelia Earhart



Lotfia Elnadi



Melody Danquah



Asli Hassan Abade



Irene Koki Mutungi

an Air force pilot in Somalia, to date there has not been another female aviator that has been able to join the Somali air force due to the political atmosphere in Somalia. One of the most important factors in the development of African women aviators was the independence and social progress of African nations. In East Africa, Kenya's Irene Koki Mutungi became the first female pilot to fly with the national carrier, Kenya Airways, beginning in 1995, and remained the only one in her field for the next six years. In 2004, she became the first African woman to captain a commercial airliner – first a Boeing 737, and later a 787.

Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are still a minority in highly skilled positions in the aviation sector. IATA's 2022 statistics provide data on the number of women in aviation worldwide. For example, women make up six (6) percent of CEO's, five point eight (5.8) percent of pilots, less than nine (9) percent of aeronautical engineers, and eighteen (18) percent in the flight dispatcher category.

The master's thesis prepared by the author of this paper is the first academic study to specifically address the issues of women in African aviation, specifically in Kenya and South Africa. It shows that wide economic disparities, cultural history and social upbringing are just some of the unique challenges facing young African girls. For example, when they want to enter the aviation industry, many lack male or female role models who could point them toward or guide them in a career in aviation.

Women interviewed in the study who had made an entry into aviation careers said they had struggled with overt or subtle biases during training. Among them were comments from instructors such as,

'Women are difficult or slow to train,' or, 'Girls hurt themselves easily.' In South Africa, racist remarks were also often made. Among them: 'These black girls are troublesome...'

However, the biggest challenge in finding a job for African women is not gender, but the few jobs available. This is compounded by gender bias in corporate hiring processes.

In addition to the nature of corporate culture, another important factor is the importance and influence that family and faith have on women aviators and their career advancement. Numerous respondents expressed the difficulty of being a wife and mother while pursuing a career in aviation. One of the Kenyan participants specifically stated that it was impossible to balance both without God's intervention. The majority of participants from Kenya and South Africa strongly believe that faith in God has shaped their aviation careers to date, and provided them with employment.

A participant from South Africa pointed out an interesting perspective on the topic of family and aviation. She expressed that the difficulty of finding a spouse and starting a family as an African female aviator is a decision influenced by male and African culture. The idea that 'women don't want to have children' or the unspoken 'African rule' in households that 'women should take care of the homestead' influence the decision for, or against, a career in aviation. Thus, starting a family can simultaneously mean the end of a career in aviation.

The biggest challenge for women in African aviation is accessing the opportunities available to them. This begins with the application process, continues with training, and extends



to everyday work and opportunities for advancement. The existence of educational institutions, the quality and type of training offered, and the suitability and availability of jobs are all important. From the data presented globally on this topic – and the African perspective – it is clear that the challenges faced by women in aviation are not limited to continents. A negative work culture prevails in many companies, work-life balance is problematic, and the negative impact of the pandemic on the labour market is still a dominant issue, especially in Africa. While the corporate culture is inherently competitive, the implicit bias and discrimination against women in many places leads them to leave employment early.

This article is based on a master's thesis by Maseka Semo-Olesi Kithinji titled, *The Aviation Industry in Africa: An Analysis of the Challenges Women in Aviation Face in Kenya, South Africa and Other African Countries* in the Department of Business Administration, Professional MBA in Aviation Management at Danube University Krems, Austria. [📄](#)

## The Aviation Industry in Africa: An Analysis of the Challenges Women in Aviation Face.