HANDS-ON MODEL FOR ATTRACTING GIRLS TO AVIATION GAINS POPULARITY

News / Airlines



“The story of women’s struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.” Gloria Steinem

Among those leading the shift to gender balance in air and space is the Institute for Women of Aviation Worldwide (iWOAW), whose flagship outreach program, Women of Aviation Worldwide Week, “is strictly designed to grab the attention of girls of all ages not familiar with the industry and introduce them to the opportunities available to them, hands-on, while building their knowledge of past and present women’s contributions,” explains Mireille Goyer, founder and president.

The program has become truly global in nature. Over the last several years Oklahoma-based iWOAW has inspired around 6,000 volunteers in 36 countries to organize outreach activities during the Women Of Aviation Worldwide Week, which is held around 8 March of each year – the anniversary of the world’s first female pilot license (in 1910) and International Women’s Day (celebrated since 1914). Women-centric events take place at airports, aerodromes and museums around the world, and special commemoration flights are often conducted. Many girls also get to experience their very first flights; general aviation pilots volunteer their time as part of Goyer's "Fly it Forward' challenge.

While attracting women to aviation vocations can be challenging anywhere – the percentage of female pilots in North America and Europe has been at a virtual stand-still since 1980; and the

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percentage of female aircraft maintenance technicians is less than 2%, says Goyer – the iWOAW founder believes countries with younger populations such as India and many Asian countries "have a greater potential for exponential growth because the 'old guard' is less prevalent and younger people tend to be more willing to challenge the status quo".

Indeed, India is currently leading the world in terms of percentage of women airline pilots (11% versus less than 5% in the US) despite the fact that India's first woman pilot, Sarla Thakral, earned her pilot license 25 years after the first American female pilot did, explains Goyer.

The first event inspired by iWOAW in India was held in 2013 in collaboration with the Ninety-Nines India, an association of women pilots. Led by Nivedita Bhasin, a Boeing 787 captain with Air India, the event featured simulator and balloon rides for some 500 young under-privileged girls.



"This was their first air experience and I suspect not their last," says Bhasin, who holds the distinction of becoming the youngest woman pilot to command a commercial jet aircraft on 1 January, 1990.

Additional iWOAW activities in India have been organized spontaneously by training providers and control towers, says Goyer, noting that the two fastest growing segments for women currently are air traffic control and dispatching.

"We continue to encourage everyone who cares about aviation in India and cares to see the industry prosper to participate in the Women Of Aviation Worldwide Week celebration as a proven way to engage the female population. We hope that many in India will join our effort to set a new Guinness world record as we raise awareness across the globe by building pink paper planes on 8 March 2016, 12:00-12:15 local time (some Guinness mandated restrictions apply; see **www.WomenOfAviationWeek.org**. This type of activity allows almost anyone to participate regardless of financial circumstances."

Goyer firmly believes that a hands-on approach is key to attracting girls and women to aviation. "Nothing is real until it is experienced," she says. "Studies have demonstrated that women perceive aviation as a male industry and thus do not feel that they have a chance prospering in it."

It seems that iWOAW's model is gaining in popularity. "Since we started advocating nearly seven years ago, we have seen a significant and increasing awakening of the industry globally," says Goyer.

"Statistically, we have recorded an increase in female starts. Our model is widely recognized for its effectiveness, so much so that, six years after we placed a personal phone to invite/engage Women in Aviation International, they finally recognized its worth and decided to duplicate it for their own member/chapter restricted outreach initiative, Girls in Aviation Day."

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Captain Nivedita Bhasin (in Indian dress) comes from a family of pilots. Image credit-Nivedita Bhasin



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