

It used to be the best shit job in the world

– cabin attendants and ageing in a deregulated sector

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Introduction

This paper is based on experiences from a specific occupational group and a small part of Swedish working life. Nevertheless the narrative emerging throughout the text is hopefully valuable for anyone interested in contemporary work life and its consequences. The occupation in focus is that of the flight attendant, a female-dominated occupation at the interface between the service and transportation industries. What makes this group interesting is that, over a short period of time, it has experienced what could be likened to freefall in terms of working conditions and status. Thus, this paper shows how degraded working conditions and an undermined occupational status, coupled with aging, affect these women's work and life situations.

One of the reasons for my interest in this theme is that today there is talk of the importance of creating physical and psycho-social working conditions in which people endure. It is matter of both wanting and being able to remain working until retirement age is reached, or even longer. Working life does not, however, offer sustainable working conditions to all occupational groups. As an academic or a senior white-collar worker, the likelihood is considerably greater that you both want and are able to remain at work than if you belonged to some lower blue or white-collar grades. In other words, there is a strong link between working conditions, health, wellbeing, and work satisfaction (Lindberg & Vingård 2012). This working life issue, i.e. creating working conditions in which people do not fall apart and both want and are able to work until retirement, is conditional upon another matter, however – i.e. the survival and competitiveness of companies. When it comes to money or life, profitability or health, money and profitability tend to be prioritised. Therefore the voices and experiences presented in this paper are largely a result of both the constant quest for profitability and how this, in combination with technical developments and deregulation, impacts upon employees.

The departure point of this paper is data material that is based on conversations with seven flight attendants employed by Scandinavian Airlines (SAS). These women are aged between 50 and 55 and are from a middle-class background. They have been working in the occupation for between 24 and 30 years, and for SAS for between 16 and 23 years. Only one of them has been employed by SAS for the entire period, the others started off their careers working for other Swedish domestic airlines. An umbrella term for these cabin staff is CAs (cabin attendants). In actual fact, the flight attendant (serving and looking after sales) is one of three on-board jobs performed in the cabin. The others are purser (cabin crew manager) and steward (responsible for meals). I use the terms CA, cabin crew, and flight attendant synonymously. The experiences of the job of flight attendant dealt with in this paper originate from regular airlines and not from charter companies.

The aim of the interviews was to obtain a picture of the work situation and the life situation. These were conducted in the form of an open conversation during which no specific interview guide was used. The conversations were primarily governed by the areas that the respondents themselves highlighted as important. Despite the fact that, of course, there are individual variations and that each respective woman has her own story, living conditions, and experience, much is shared. They describe what a closely knit bunch they have become during the tough period that SAS has been undergoing over the last 10-15 years. One part of the conversation was recorded, while for the other, notes were used. This is not an organisational study where SAS as an organisation is the main object under study; instead, this is a study about working conditions, with the focus on a specific occupational group. Publications based on the material, including this, have been read and approved by the interviewees.

The paper is arranged in such a way that firstly there is a brief historical retrospective of the occupation linked to the context of today. After that, I present the women's thoughts on their work; firstly in the form of a section on how they ended up in this job, followed by a

section on the foundations of the occupation's status, a section on working conditions, and a section on how they attempt to deal with their work situation. The paper ends with some swearing.

“Dream job” going awry

“There is something special about flight attendants” writes Gustafson (2003), pointing out that the job of flight attendant is one of few occupations where women engage in an activity that has been linked to men – i.e. travel. Female dominated occupations have rarely been associated with mobility, and not with high status either. Against this backdrop, the job of flight attendant is special since it has been characterised by a rather unusual mix of femininity, service, high status, glamour, urbanity, and mobility. In a study comparing perceptions of the statuses of various occupations, it is established that the flight attendant is one of the few female-dominated occupations with a relatively high status (Ulfsdotter Eriksson 2006). This cannot be expressed with the same degree of self-evidence anymore. This occupation's status is not what it has been and the decline in this status has gone relatively quickly.

Without getting stuck in the historical dimension of the job of flight attendant, it is still appropriate to do a brief retrospective. This is due to the job's historical roots and contexts still influencing our way of relating to both the job itself and those doing it. In connection with the historically handed down conceptions surrounding the job of flight attendant encountering today's flight attendants and today's work in the cabin, a sliding frame of reference is created, or alternatively a divided picture of the occupation. In part, this is one that bears in mind the glamorous side, painting a picture of an occupation with good wages and conditions, and in part one that sooner sees it as a strenuous and unqualified service occupation.

Status-wise, the flight attendant had her glory days during the post-war period, something that was tied up with the exclusivity of flying; that air travel was restricted to the privileged few, and the luxury was often overwhelming. There was plenty of space to move around on board planes, the menu was exclusive, the wines likewise, and in most cases, there was also a cocktail bar on board (Lovegrove 2000). There is, thus, a link with the term “jet set”, i.e. the international, travelling High Society, and flying (Nilsson 2011:9). The aura surrounding the exclusivity of flying had a spill-over effect on cabin crew. The well-paid and strong status of the pilot group, too, rubbed off on cabin crew. This occupation became especially coveted and, in many respects, it was a ticket out into the world for women, primarily from the upper middle class. The occupation’s popularity persisted even after scheduled flights had obtained a more folksy character, and the proportion of passengers in tourist and budget class constantly increased. Throughout this entire period, and up until today, the flight attendant has embodied the airlines’ image and been seen as a symbol of them (Barry 2007).

The industry has been subject to continuous reshaping since the post-war period, for instance via the technical developments that have enabled flights to be faster, longer, higher, and with more passengers. SAS, the Scandinavian flag carrier, was a successful company during this period and its high status was widely known. Service was a prestige word and the passenger was king. From the 90s and on, however, drastic changes have been occurring in the marketplace. In 1991, Sweden’s overseas flights were deregulated and in 1992 its domestic flights were deregulated; since that, the number of airports has constantly been increasing with more (smallish) airports coming into service. These deregulations contributed to regular flights taking yet another crucial step away from being an exclusive mode of transport towards mass transportation in order to be able to compete with the budget companies (Dobruszkes 2006).

Today, it is not so self-evident that the passenger is king; instead, the passenger is something that is to be rapidly and effectively moved around while simultaneously being induced to consume. In step with prices being under downward pressure, the level of service has also fallen. The new passenger groups show greater variation in terms of class background and do not have the same expectations regarding service. All in all, this has affected the occupational role, duties, and status of cabin crew. This once so attractive job was created by an industry and companies, like SAS, that no longer can afford to keep it (Barry 2007:221). The new low-cost actors have chosen an entirely different focus when shaping this occupational role and have never interested themselves in creating it in accordance with the traditional role. It is more a matter of, in the case of Ryanair, distancing themselves from this.

Despite the fact that the occupational role has changed, there still exists a stereotype image of the “air hostess”, creating a sliding framework of interpretation and at times conflicting expectations and conceptions. Readers who feel doubtful that this is indeed the case can amuse themselves by asking those around them to describe the job of the cabin crew. Many will receive answers characterised by this duplicity, i.e. femininity and glamour, on the one hand, and drudgery and boring duties, on the other. In all probability, several will add that they are unable to understand how such a grinding job can be coveted.

The working conditions of cabin crew have changed considerably in connection with the industry being reshaped. The occupation has been degraded, in terms of both conditions and status; however, at the same time, the women included in this study carry with them experience of another time. Next, this process will be described and introduced using a brief retrospective, in which the women describe both their route into the job and their previous experience of it.

The years rolled by and everything was great

Despite the fact that the work of the flight attendant is often described as a dream job, it emerges that the women in this study did not choose this occupation in order to realise their dreams. It is sooner the case that they ended up in this industry due to someone in their circle of acquaintances or families working there already. Either there was a recommendation to apply, given by some or other acquaintance, or the working conditions and the job appeared to be so attractive among the friends who were already in it that it was quite simply seen as a good alternative. One CA says; *It wasn't a matter of walking around dreaming about becoming an air hostess exactly. I had some friends at the stables who worked as air hostesses and it seemed to be a great job. It suited someone who had a horse perfectly as you had lots of free time.* Another CA says; *My then boyfriend's dad tipped me off!*, while yet another pointed out that; *I had an acquaintance working in air travel and she made sure I applied. She sorted out the application and everything!* There is nothing to indicate that it was the possibilities of cultivating hyper femininity linked with high status that were tempting. In other words, there is a danger in equating a gender stereotypical occupation with the notion that those who gravitate towards that occupation carry these conceptions. This in turn can mean that hasty and gender stereotypical conclusions are drawn as regards, in this case, women and their driving forces vis-à-vis choice of occupation. In the case of the women who were interviewed, it was the good working conditions and the opportunities to travel the world that were tempting.

All of them started working in air travel at just over 20 years of age. None of them had any plans at that time to spend their entire professional lives in the industry; on the contrary, they saw the job as something they could spend five years doing before doing something else. However, all of them really enjoyed the job, entailing that they kept doing it even though

some of them switched to other airlines within Sweden. Despite the fact that, then too, this job entailed irregular working hours, overnight stops, and a physically arduous and stressful job, this was not seen as a problem. One CA exclaims; *It used to be the best shit job in the world! I've really loved doing my job. It's lively, with people on the go, and constantly new encounters.* This positive attitude to work is something that all of them return to, pointing out that, even though there were thoughts of leaving, this never happened. *We've quite simply had such a wonderful time,* says one CA.

When we talk about exactly what it was that was so good about the job during this period, it is primarily the whole lifestyle that the job gave rise to. The irregular and inconvenient working hours and the overnight stops in other places were not seen as problematic. On the contrary, it was this irregularity, together with the travel itself, that made both the job attractive and life good. The irregularity was not seen as inconvenient, sooner as variety. It quickly became a lifestyle which also showed itself to work well when starting a family. *Sure, we worked a lot and we were away a lot. On the other hand, however, I was at home a lot, too. My children never complained that I was away, and they also have a dad, too. It was more that they wondered from time to time if it would soon be time for me to go away on long haul. Then, I'd been at home too long!*, says one CA and laughs. The interviewees say that the shifts and rotas were arranged in such a way that there was enough time to rest and recover, both on short and long haul flights. Over and above this, the majority worked on fixed rotas, as they were known, enabling them to plan the division of duties at home and their social lives etc. in good time. It further emerges that these women's absence from their homes contributed towards their partners assuming greater family responsibilities, thus easing the balance between work and family.

The job of flight attendant enabled a sustainable life situation. The good level of work satisfaction was a result of both their work per se and their work in relation to life in other

respects (Karlsson et al., 2012). Recently, and to an ever increasing degree, research has been emphasising the importance of studying work in relation to life in other respects. It is clear here that the good prerequisites for striking a balance between work and life in other respects, despite irregular working hours and being away from home, constituted an important part of the work satisfaction and wellbeing of this group. Another factor contributing towards a feeling of fairness and satisfaction was the perception that there was a good balance between the work being done and the wages and other benefits being received (Sigriest 1996).

Alongside the working conditions, which were retrospectively perceived to have been good, as also testified to by the interviewees' extensive lengths of service, a number of job-specific status foundations can also be identified.

Chosen, competent, and with head held high

As social beings, we are in need of recognition and affirmation. The workplace is one of many arenas for this. Affirmation and status are causally-related to each other and changes in one dimension bring consequences in the other. Occupational status is thus impacted by how it is recognised and affirmed, both internally within one's own organisation and externally in society at large. This in turn can lead to either a strengthening or a shift upwards or downwards in the status hierarchy. I will dwell upon the status foundations which have been, and in part continue to be, of significance to the occupation. One of the foundations, flight as a mode of transport and as a symbol of successful and important people, has been discussed in connection with the historical retrospective and will be mentioned here only in passing.

Travelling across the world has been, and continues to be, linked to status, especially by air. The air travel in itself, as previously mentioned, has constituted, historically speaking, a status marker which has rubbed off on flight attendants. The fact that the passengers came from privileged social groups of high status has also entailed consequences for those serving them.

The pilots', historically speaking, privileged position, strong union, and high status has trickled down to cabin crew. The status foundation, however, has been undermined in conjunction with the deregulation of air travel, the weakening of the trade unions, and the budget airlines' turn towards mass transportation, even though the process commenced earlier on. It is quite simply not as exclusive to fly anymore – regardless of whether you are a passenger or crew.

Yet another status foundation, and grounds for occupational pride, is the cabin crew's responsibility for on-board safety. This is absolutely their most important duty, i.e. prevention and ensuring that rules and routines are complied with, as well as constantly being prepared that something might happen. Flying carries a risk and is thus linked to dramatic catastrophes of various kinds – not least after 9/11. In most cases, occupational roles are associated with risks and dramatic accidents, masculinely coded; but in this case, it is the female-dominated cabin crew who will act heroically and help others. They must also have knowledge of as well as be prepared for on-board illnesses. *It's unquestionably our most important duty and we never interfere with safety – never. Our occupational pride prohibits that. It's, kind of, the last thing we've got left, now that we've been transformed into walking travellers' shops*, says one CA.

Relations with passengers constitute a third status foundation that can be identified. It emerges that these women have developed a way of working in the cabin by which they can meet and engage with all passengers – varyingly troublesome. There is occupational pride in being able to provide good service, dealing with and preferably bringing round surly and grumpy passengers, being able to maintain a good atmosphere in the cabin despite delays or other unforeseen and undesirable events, and acting confidently and professionally during incidents of different kinds. It does not appear to be the case that, in accordance with Hochschild (1994), they have to relinquish their own dignity and selves in order to engage

with the passengers, rather it is a part of their professionalism and dignity. The service relationship is not characterized by cabin crew perceiving themselves to be subordinate to the passengers, but more in terms of them holding the conductor's baton. Contact with the passengers is seen, on the whole, as something positive, but also as something that has been affected negatively by the mass transportation logic and the increased time pressure.

The women's experiences show that they work under the influence of two service logics, where one is about the newer mass transportation logic, with a satisfactory level of service as a target, and the other is a business travel logic, with a great emphasis on service, quality, and the extra touch (Barry 2007). The women were recruited into an occupation characterised by the latter logic and came to be socialised into an occupational role in which the service provided to the passenger was of key importance. *We could run ourselves into the ground, almost, to please the passengers, nothing was impossible. But there was no way we were being pushed around. We received enormous support from the company. We were their public face and we always heard that we'd been chosen and how important and skilful we were. Imagine the 80s! Imagine the moment of truth! That was us!* The status foundation constituted by the cabin crew's ability to provide a good level of service has amassed a occupational pride and been a source of positive affirmation. Today, these two logics are felt to be on a collision course since the service logic is still there but is almost impossible to live up to since the service level being achieved today does not form the basis for feeling recognised and proud. Not having enough time to do a good job of providing a good level of service to the passengers is experienced as frustrating (Bolton & Boyd 2003). *The older ones among us find the low level of service difficult. For the younger ones, who don't know anything other than ... quickly ... quickly ... hurry ... hurry ... it's a lot easier not to care. They're different. They're tougher than us and don't care as much about the passengers and others. They're a bit more self-centred.* It would seem as though cabin crew initially lost their status, and internally

within their own company, and then that the slide became increasingly general. *I've been proud of myself, my profession, my team, my workplace, my employer. It meant something working for SAS. Now, I don't feel that anymore. It's just gone. Nobody at the company says: Oh what a great job you're doing. Those at the top don't care about us at all. If things don't suit us, we can leave – and that's exactly what they want.*

The status of an occupation rubs off on those doing it, and this has also been the case for cabin crew. They all describe how there was pride attached to being CAs. The interviewed women all say that they felt chosen, significant, and respected. This pride was an important part of their identity. *Even though this wasn't the most qualified of jobs, I was still proud of being a flight attendant. I stood tall in my uniform and was able to walk with my head held high. All the time, we were reminded that we'd been chosen. Today, I curl up and am almost ashamed to show myself in my uniform, on the metro or on the bus. Of course, everyone can read about SAS in the papers and especially about us cabin crew.*

Despite the fact that their work per se is, and has been, repetitious, that feeling never previously gained the upper hand since their entire work situation was weighed into how they perceived their occupation. An important part of this combined work situation is the professional pride and the status foundations described. When these are undermined, the resistance of the individual and the group is weakened, contributing towards degraded psychosocial sustainability. This sustainability will be further weakened if working conditions are degraded.

An increased workload

There is no doubt that the deregulation of air travel, the increased competition from the budget airlines, and the changed passenger group have all entailed consequences for SAS.

This company has been facing major financial difficulties for a lengthy period of time. Being

the national matter that the company is, both its hardships and rumours about its sale and the threat of bankruptcy have received lots of media attention.

Through staff reductions, robustly weakened conditions for its staff, and a series of other support measures, the company has managed to stay in the marketplace. The unions have been forced to sign agreements that staff perceive to be inhuman, and criticism from both staff and the unions has been stiff (Svenska Dagbladet 2013). SAS management points out that these measures have been necessary for the company's survival and that continued efforts to increase revenues and reduce costs are required, while simultaneously emphasising safety, punctuality, and also a high quality of service (SAS Annual Report, 2013).

The interviewed women dwell a lot on how the deregulation of air travel and changed European agreements and guidelines regarding how much cabin crew are able to work have influenced their work situation. The agreement entered into at the end of 2012 entailed, among other things, an increase in the maximum number of working hours to 47.5 hours per week and from 10.5 to 13 hours per day. Daily working hours can, furthermore, be increased to 15 hours per day, and to 60 hours over a seven-day period in the event of delays and the re-planning of rotas. EU stipulations allow an annual working time of 2,000 hours, 900 of which are in the air. Cabin crew are no longer entitled to 5 but to a maximum of 3 weeks' holidays between 15 May and 15 September. They no longer have the right to meal breaks on the ground between flights, with lunch and other breaks instead being taken on board. The retirement age was raised from 60 to 65, and pension conditions were degraded. In previous agreements, subsistence was reduced to a third. There has been a reduction in the number of free weekends they are entitled to each month to one, which in practice can mean working six weekends in a row. The majority have been forced to switch to variable working hours, meaning that there are no fixed turns which recur, thus making it impossible to work out which days are free and which are to be worked. As they get their rotas for the upcoming

month on the 15th of each month, they do not know how their rotas will look until two weeks prior to these coming into force.

In other words, the working conditions are especially demanding, with the women being of the opinion that they are devastating health-wise. Some have been on sick leave due to exhaustion and others due to various repetitive strain injuries. While the interviews were being conducted, Sweden was greeted by the news that one in five cabin employees at SAS was on sick leave (Dagens Nyheter, 2013-11-01). These numbers of staff on sick leave are an effect of poor working conditions, but also a strategy for dealing with an overpowering workload. *The loops we work are such that you can't believe they're true. We have a loop of 14 hours in which you first fly from Stockholm to Copenhagen and then back and forth to Fuerto Ventura on the Canary Islands, and then direct to Luleå in northern Sweden. And you're not entitled to any rest and recovery then, it's just a matter of getting right back to work again the very next day.* In a report by the Stress Research Institute, reference is made to a series of studies of shift lengths and their consequences for health (Kecklund et al., 2010:65). The results show that shifts should never exceed 12 hours, if the job is light in nature. If, on the other hand, a job involves a greater load, e.g. is heavy or stressful, the length of the shift should not exceed 8 hours. The risk of making misjudgements starts to increase at 10 hours. If the shift length exceeds 12 hours, it is important that only a few shifts are worked in a row, and that space is then provided for rest and recovery. If two 12-hour shifts are worked in a row, these should be followed by two free days. The situation of the women in this study does not meet these guidelines, which might be one explanation for why all of them emphasise tiredness as their constant companion. Sleep and stomach problems, too, are very common due to fixed mealtimes being impossible, with visits to the toilet being made when opportunities arise and sleep happening at very irregular times. Working full time under such conditions means that there is no time or energy left for anything else than work.

Besides long shifts, the varied working hours are also demanding. There are flights, in principle, around the clock and the loops worked by cabin crews do not run either clockwise or anti-clockwise, but can be completely varied. Studies have shown that shift sequences with different shift combinations, during which there is switching between both clockwise and anti-clockwise rotation for sleep and work, affect both health and wellbeing negatively (Kecklund et al., 2010:65). *One day, check-in is at 5 in the morning and the next you can be working until 11 at night. Then, there's long haul, when we fly to the US and lose a night's sleep each time.* Research also indicates that shift work containing elements of nightshift leads to powerful and acute disruptions to sleep, and to sleep being shortened by 2-3 hours. Besides substantial tiredness, this results in reduced performance and an increased risk of accidents and misjudgements. The irregular circadian rhythm also causes increased ill health through cardiovascular disease, stomach and intestinal disease, and certain forms of cancer (Kecklund et al., 2010:46). All the women feel great anxiety regarding their health, but also that their long working days might make them less alert if something were to happen. This anxiety also applies to the pilots, with one CA saying; *There have been occasions when I've really wondered whether it's ok to fly with a certain pilot when you know how long he or she has been working.* Demands regarding profit and safety thus generate conflicting expectations on the cabin crew, with one CA asking herself: *Am I supposed to be this safety-conscious person, which is really the primary focus of my job, or am I supposed to do things in an economical way?*

For a long time, there has been loyalty among the cabin crew. They have accepted the degradations and have not complained, either inwards/upwards in the organisation or outwards to the outside world. *We've been so loyal, so terribly loyal. We've gone along with fixing this. Then we were dropped in it. You get sadder and sadder and more and more resigned. There doesn't seem to be any end to it.* Previously, there were hopes that, if they

were there for the company, then the company would be there for them, but this has not been the case. This has undermined their loyalty and, similar to the numbers on sick leave, the internal criticism has also been increasing. *Previously, I'd probably have defended SAS, but I wouldn't do that today. Previously, we were loyal but we're not anymore since all this business of degrading conditions happened. We call it like we see it. It's crap.*

There has been individual and collective elevation of what cabin crew have perceived to be problematic within the organisation, but this has not had any effect. The women provide a raft of examples of aspects of their work where they have wished for change. Besides their working hours and rotas, this is also about their physical working environment. *We're vulnerable and we cherish our brand so much that we do everything we can for our passengers. For example, they can take more baggage into the cabin, which makes our work more difficult and takes time. Then there's the coffee and tea that we offer them, which has spoilt things a lot for us. As if people would choose this airline just for free coffee. The only thing that's happened is that we serve coffee, tea, and water in bulk. I really can't say how much pouring I do in one day. You can feel it in your hands, and we have inflamed tendons and stuff. Imagine trying to grip a large, soft plastic bottle and pour water from it, my thumb is so sore from doing this that I can't do push-ups. I'm in such pain. Last spring, I had so much throbbing in my hand and arm all night that I couldn't sleep. We have really struggled to get smaller bottles, but nothing's happened. Other examples include new, light, and unstable trollies that can only be opened on one side, making team-work on board more difficult and lengthening serving times. Moreover, these wobbly trollies, with hot coffee and tea on top of them, mean that they are constantly parrying sudden turns and that they cannot leave them unattended. On one occasion, a trolley swung round in such a way that a CA got hot coffee all over herself and her eardrum melted away. We've argued about these trollies a lot. Now what we do is rebuild them, once we're airborne, by connecting two trollies together*

to make it work. We're not allowed to do that and management have sent out emails telling us that we have to stop doing it.

The feeling of hopelessness concerning their work situation has contributed towards a kind of distancing whereby the women have ceased emotionally and cognitively engaging in their work. They also describe how they have lowered their demands regarding how their work is conducted by not delivering the same level of service and by not being there for their employer in the same way as before. This is in line with the assumption of Astvik and Melin (2013:64) that a series of compensatory strategies exist which are used in order to be able to handle a taxing work situation where the organisation does not offer sufficient resources – e.g. time for rest and recovery, time to perform one's duties, influence – in order to be able to balance work-related demands. The compensatory strategies used include calling in sick when they do not feel as though they have the energy, not working full time, taking great responsibility for their own health and lifestyle in order to have the energy, and dedicating a large part of their free time to rest and recovery at the expense of other things. One CA says; *A lot of the time when I'm not at work is spent on ensuring that I have the energy to be at work.* All of the interviewed women are in some form of education; in order to reduce their working hours, in order to have the energy to work, and in order to increase their chances of finding a job that they hope they will enjoy doing.

The women emphasise the continual degradations that have occurred as something which nowadays overshadows their everyday lives. These hopeless developments, no positive future prospects, bad working conditions, bad health and well-being have contributed towards making them look around for other jobs.

Worn out, locked in, and unwanted

The women are locked into a workplace and an occupation in which they neither can, for health reasons, nor want to remain working (Aronsson, Dallner & Gustafsson 2000), while simultaneously having “limited opportunities for change” (Furåker 2010: 57). In other words, they are in an unwanted situation and are facing difficulties finding new jobs. Their anxieties are legitimate since studies have shown that employers are unwilling to hire new staff aged 50 and over (Eklund 2002). *I've realised, after having applied for as many jobs as I have done, that I'm no longer of interest as I don't have any certificates and I'm old.* In addition to this, it can be established that the situation of older cabin crew is more precarious as they assess their chances of getting a comparable job as very small, while still seeing no other alternative but to switch. *I know that I'll be worse off. I earn (SEK) 34 k today and I know I won't get that in a new job. I'll have to drop to at least (SEK) 22 - 23 k a month. But “fine”, I'll take it. For my part, it isn't worth what it's costing me to stay there in terms of body and soul.* All the women were aged between 50 and 54, when interviewed, and were aiming, up until the 2012 agreement, to retire at 60. The change in the retirement age to 65 was thus a considerable setback. Managing 6-10 years of part-time service was something that they felt was reasonable, but a further five years. That increased their feeling of being locked in.

Another factor influencing this feeling is the conviction that the company wants them to leave. From having felt chosen, competent, and appreciated, they now feel too old, too highly paid, and that they too frequently expect too much from as well as question their management. By reason of that, they have been moved into a group of unwanted employees. *You're no more than a bit of fluff. I'm a number. I'm worth nothing. You feel so let down.* The absence of support and respect on the part of management enhances the feeling of being locked in. This is simultaneous with the women in question becoming older and experiencing problems

with their wellbeing and health. Their current situation is thus characterised by being locked in, being unhealthy, and feeling disinclined to work (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2013). Neither do they feel able to influence their work situation or to make themselves heard by management, and their loyalty ran out years ago. *Our bosses are offended at us because we don't like our situation and we carry on working. They want us to carry on working and look happy, and think it's completely alright to work 14 hours a day without complaining*, says one CA, while another says; *I feel enormous contempt towards those people who just look at us and say: Things will turn out fine*. Accordingly, one of Hirschman's (1970) famous strategies remains, i.e. exit; but this is not a straightforward solution either, due to the hostesses' limited employability.

Bloody hell ...

At its peak for some years. This is how the women described how they viewed their future within the occupation when they started. The paper has provided a brief insight into how things went after they stayed, when the situation started to become unsustainable, how they became locked in, and how they are now trying to find exit options. When they foresaw their time in the occupation, they did not know how well they would enjoy it; that it was actually *the best shit job in the world*. Expressing themselves today, almost 30 years have passed, of which the last 10-15 have consisted of constant degradations to their working conditions. The women understand why the company has been forced to take steps to meet the competition from other budget airlines; however, this does not make their working conditions better or the job easier to do. The company's economic sustainability seems to pre-require unsustainable working conditions.

Degraded working conditions have been normalised and have set the standard as regards what kind of cabin crew the company wants. Unregulated market forces have broken down

the foundations of good and valuable work in the industry and the ideal employee appears today to be a malleable (young and/or contracted) person who works for a couple of years under flexible forms of employment. This is a logic that leads to the employees being replaced while the poor working conditions remain. Older cabin crew, in relation to this ideal type, are afflicted with a series of faults. Their bodies start to become worn out and their wages are too high. They have experience of another, today “unrealistic”, work situation and of other conditions. They were trained in an outdated service logic. They have stopped being loyal and are now angry and difficult instead. Exhortations for companies to adapt to an aging workforce (Dagens Nyheter 2012) would thus not seem to be having any great impact in this particular case. Other powers and incentives exist that are more powerful – that of profit.

Employees’ resistance to their employer can express itself in a range of different ways (Karlsson 2011). One way is to resign, which the interviewed women will do as soon as they have found jobs. In this case, the resistance offered appears to be slightly pointless since it is in line with the employer’s will to recruit a new set of CAs. Neither does it seem as though this resistance will change the poor working conditions, rather it will facilitate their normalisation. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this is a rational choice given the women’s health, life situation, and future prospects in the occupation. Or, as one CA pithily formulated it; *Bloody hell, that’s enough ...*

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