INDIA REEVALUATES WHY IT'S KEEPING PREGNANT PILOTS GROUNDED

News / Airlines

A few years ago a passenger on an Indian budget carrier caused an uproar on learning that the captain was a woman. "I don't want to die. She can't take care of the house, how will she take care of a plane?" he reportedly yelled. Rightfully, he was deplaned. While his knuckle-dragging tribe may have decreased trivially since then, one wonders what the passenger's reaction would have been if he knew the captain was pregnant. One would assume he would have been scandalized that she had deigned to fly.

While Qatar Airways last year changed its draconian restrictions on cabin crew concerning marriage and pregnancy, in India the discussion is focused on when the pilot should stop flying when pregnant. Nivedita Bhasin, the third woman pilot to join then government-owned Indian Airlines, now part of Air India, has two children, both pilots. In the last 30 years, she said, the pilot maternity situation in India has remained status quo. "The day a doctor informs you of your pregnancy, you cannot fly. India needs to update its rules in line with global practices. It is accepted worldwide [that] the second trimester is safe, but not in India."

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This was confirmed by SpiceJet general manager Ajay Jasra who told RGN that pilots are taken off all flight duties the moment the pregnancy is reported. “They are then shifted to a suitable ground job, if available, with full pay excluding flying allowance, performance incentives and mobile/Internet allowance)…..They can continue in the ground job until they decide to proceed on ‘Maternity Leave’ of 12 weeks.” In case of miscarriage or medical termination of pregnancy, the crew is entitled to take leave for six weeks.

On 8 March, International Women’s Day, the topic of ‘pregnancy and pilots’ dominated an interactive dialog held for the first time by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, Ms M Sathiyavathy, who is the first woman to lead the regulatory body. The discussion revealed the need to clear up ambiguities on rules for pilots and pregnancy in India. Sathiavathy said the issue would be pursued “following discussions with the medical fraternity” on the effects of flying on the fetus and that a guideline would be brought into sync with ICAO. “In the past I have raised this issue on why we are keeping pregnant pilots on ground…” she added.

ICAO class 1 medical standards concerning pregnancy say once pregnancy is confirmed, the pilot should report it to the medical examiner. The policy states:

If declared fit, i.e. if her pregnancy is considered a normal, uncomplicated and low-risk pregnancy and medical information from her obstetrician, family physician and/or midwife supports this, she may continue to exercise the privileges of her licence from the end of the 12th week until the end of the 26th week of the gestational period. Close medical supervision must be established for the part of the pregnancy where the pilot continues flying, and all abnormalities should be reported to the medical examiner. Provided the puerperium is uncomplicated and full recovery takes place, she should be able to resume aviation duties four to six weeks after confinement.

As RGN learned at the DGCA meeting, there is still plenty of debate on the issue – with some firmly in the ‘take leave’ camp and others seeing no problem with flying during a healthy pregnancy.

But times are certainly changing, and countries around the world are looking to change outdated regulations. To wit, in December 2013, the Israeli Air Force altered its policy and announced that women would no longer be grounded during the second trimester. As reported by YNetNews at the time, flying during the 15th to 25th week of the pregnancy is allowed for transport flights that are up to four hours long, under 8,000 feet, and accompanied by another pilot.

02 APRIL 2016

SOURCE: RUNWAYGIRLNETWORK
ARTICLE LINK:
https://50skyshades.com/index.php/news/airlines/india-reevaluates-why-its-keeping-pregnant-pilots-grounded

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