



‘LET’S CONNECT!’

Tired of being the only woman on the hill most days, Liz Dengler started a women-only chat group. Here’s what she discovered

When I started flying in Colorado, I was one of only about 10 active female pilots in the whole state. In the USA women make up less than 11% of total pilots – one in 10. Though numbers vary by location, the general trend is there are far fewer women than men in free flight.

As the only woman pilot on launch almost every day, I often faced certain assumptions about my skills or competency. Men at launch, who didn’t know me, often assumed I was new and ignored my site intro to ask a student pilot, or routinely offered unsolicited and not applicable flying advice.

For years, I’ve watched the way men planned tasks or trips together, seemingly blind to my existence. It was heart-breaking to ask for help from more advanced pilots and be met with a kind word but then be sidelined as those same

advanced pilots took newer men under their wing to mentor them. In those early years, I always felt alone in my endeavours, with few mentors and no female pilot friends.

Early on, I figured some of this was likely due to my own fairly introverted nature. However, after watching the occasional other woman pilot show up to launch, boisterous and bold, and be equally sidelined, I knew it wasn’t only me. Camaraderie felt elusive, and the cliques were exclusive to men. It was isolating to be the lone woman on launch, day after day when I so dearly wanted to be part of the community. Still, when the conversation was so routinely dominated by “bro-isms,” it was a challenge to feel relatable or that I could connect.

Don’t get me wrong
My flying experiences at the hill were almost always amazing, but I grew weary of having to



shrug off these ingrained habits of this casual sexism that occurred more than I'd like to admit. Yes, I can rationalise that casual sexism is not intentional or meant to be harmful or rude, and as a rule, I shrug it off. But having to "deal with it," instead of working to change it, takes its toll. Though I generally accept that it's a part of life, on launch, in a space that feels almost sacred, I no longer wanted to have to shrug it off.

Don't get me wrong – I adore the men I fly with; they are kind, knowledgeable, and wonderfully supportive. However, when I would have those occasional negative interactions with pilots who don't know me, I could feel myself pulling away.

It is a terrible feeling to have come to expect that any advice you offer a pilot floundering on launch or in the air would not be well-received simply because you are a woman. On several occasions, I have offered feedback to such a pilot and been

dismissed, or talked over, only to then watch a male friend provide the exact same advice, have the pilot take it as gospel, and also thank him for reaching out.

It has also been frustrating how many men expressed how much better they like the feeling of launch when there are women pilots around. "It's just a bit mellower and feels friendlier," they would say. I know the feeling – I prefer it too! The problem was, there were so few of us around that we had no way to connect.

Welcome to Telegram

Given our low numbers, when I started the ladies-only Telegram group for Colorado, I didn't expect it to be quite as successful as it has become. My initial intent for the group was to create a way for women pilots to connect without fear of judgment. A place to ask the hard questions, to

▲ GIRL GROUP

Pilots on an all-women hike-and-fly weekend in the Bernese Oberland, Switzerland. "It's not about excluding men ... it's about taking advantage of a supportive community"
Photo: Andy Busslinger



▲ ON THE HILL
Getting ready to fly in the Bernese
Oberland, Switzerland
Photo: Andy Bussslinger

find community, maybe even make a plan to meet up and fly together. As basically the only woman on launch every day in those early years, I longed for a bit of female camaraderie, and I decided to try and find some.

In the beginning, it was silent. With only five or ten of us leading busy lives, there wasn't much chatter. It seemed like a bust. But then, slowly, out of the clouds came the voices of a few new pilots, and from that, it has only grown. Over the last couple of years, the flying population on the

Front Range of Colorado has exploded, including the number of female pilots taking to the skies. At the time of writing, we now have a whopping 111 members on the ladies-only group chat for Colorado!

In the spring of 2020, as Covid-19 reared its head and shut us all down, I lost my job and spent a few months in Draper, Utah, home of the legendary Point of the Mountain and the place where I had learned to fly. On any given day, I was in awe of the number of women I saw out at the hill. Yes, we were still outnumbered ten to one, but where there are numbers, ten to one means more women at the hill.

I connected with the community and found myself hooked in with a few amazing women pilots. And during a ladies' night that we spent watching Pál Takáts videos (who needs pubs when there is Acro?) with what can only be described as the euphoria of lady birds finally finding camaraderie, another ladies-only Telegram chat group was born.

A way for us to connect quickly grew into a place where women in Utah and Jackson could reach out and find the support or friendship they were looking for. Trip ideas, wing questions, diaper choice, weather advice – no topic was off limits! Now at 58 members, we can collectively share a chuckle at mansplaining memes and not have to fear the dreaded penis jokes that tend to pop up sporadically and without warning on other chats.

Space to grow

The wonderful part of this growth is that we have already begun to see changes in our communities. Giving women a place to connect and feel supported translates into their actions at the hill. Whether the launch culture is actually changing, or if it's that we have a space where we can connect to others, it is beginning to feel better.

More women supporting each other and learning how other women do it is a substantial educational component. We can connect and know that we aren't alone in the community, even if we happen to be alone on launch. We can support each other, offer advice, or even critical feedback without fear of retribution or being rebuked.

Whether it's that they feel more comfortable calling out offensive behaviour, more confident in mentoring or connecting with other pilots, or knowing that there is a group available for them to ask questions, women are gaining confidence and feel supported in the community. These chats have given us a space to grow in the best way and lifted us up as our numbers grow.



WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT ON THERE?

#1 Mentorship and community

Being able to reach out and ask questions, or find a mentor who knows the specific struggles you deal with is a huge boon. It makes the learning process easier.

“The ladies chats are nothing but supportive,” one pilot told me, “and if someone disagrees, they do so gently and offer their viewpoint as another option, not authoritative gospel.”

Sometimes our communities can feel a bit overwhelming. Having a place where women can come together to talk about a flight or have some heart-to-heart is an incredible opportunity. “For me, it’s about a supportive community and an affirmation of women’s presence in free flight. Since we are often a minority on the hill or in the air, it’s a nice reminder that we’re everywhere and we belong!”

#2 The head game

On the women-only chat, not once have I gotten the dreaded response, “I don’t know. I don’t get scared. You just have to get over it.” Instead, as another pilot explained to me, “I’m generalising, yes, but I find that women tend to be more willing and able to talk about emotions and the mental game than men. For me, the emotional and psychological stuff is such a huge part of flying, so having a community to hash that out with is great.”

In a women-only chat, it’s more common to see discussions and not be judged for asking the questions. Yes, fear is a common topic, but so is general stress, the mentality of holding your own, and how not to get brushed aside on launch. “Women find a space in these forums to discuss things like mindset, fear, what gear is best to keep us safe, etc. Women are uniquely qualified to offer support to other women who stress over these similar things.”

#3 ‘Dumb’ questions

A women-only chat is an excellent place for pilots to relax, ask the ‘dumb questions,’ enjoy and participate in an in-depth discussion, and share their own flying stories or mishaps. And there’s a reason for that, as one pilot explained to me: “There is a general tendency for women to be perceived as objects rather than subjects – and more specifically as objects of men, whether they are our fathers, brothers, husbands, partners, whatever.”

“When we are asked on launch, ‘Who are you here with?’ or when we are kept at a distance by others because we’re ‘with’ some man, or whether we are seen as ‘available’ because we are not with some man – all of these are expressions of objecthood. In women’s groups, I appreciate how we are generally more likely to be subjects – we are ourselves, rather than a possession or affiliation of someone else. Rock on!!”

#4 Gear and personal info

Some of the most common discussions are about gear. Wing choice options for smaller pilots, harness selection tips, and ballasting up versus flying a smaller but less efficient wing. It’s helpful to have some women who’ve been through it to give pointers about what to look out for when buying new gear.

“In general gear is still marketed towards men, so a lot of times we don’t know where to start,” a pilot told me. “Women are often smaller or have curves that make finding wings or harnesses difficult. It’s easy to throw these questions in an all-ladies chat rather than a male-dominated one.”

And when you can’t just turn your back and let it flow, it’s harder than you might think to come up with a solid plan as to how you can pee on launch without letting it all bare. And what about putting on a diaper? Being able to ask these female-specific questions in a place dedicated just for women opens up the opportunities for growth

▼ LEADING OUT

Meet director Sandra Antony briefs the Supair Open 2022 in France
Photo: Marcus King





▲ MESSAGE ME

Kati Schuetz in the Munich subway. Reaching out, and having others reach out to you, can open doors in the flying world wherever you are
Photo: Jérôme Maupoint

and success. “Diapers come up a lot, and I think most women would be afraid to ask that in other chats. We shouldn’t have to feel that way because I hear guys talking about their pee tubes like it’s nothing, but it’s definitely intimidating asking those questions when guys are around.”

#5 Sexism

The dirty word. Almost all women, at some point in their flying career, will experience some form of sexism even in the kindest and most accepting of flying sites. As a rule, this is casual and unintentional – the kind that we already experience in everyday life. The type that is based on cultural biases and stereotypes that are ingrained and difficult to recognise.

Here are some examples I gathered.

Pilot 1: “My boyfriend doesn’t fly at all so it’s both hilarious and, to be honest, a little insulting, to show up to a new site, and everyone is asking him what and where he flies while ignoring me even though I’ve been flying 10 years and am a successful comp pilot.”

Pilot 2: “When I started flying, my husband (boyfriend at the time) was already flying. There were only four women in the state flying at that point, leaving most of my mentors to be guys

“However, many of the guys I flew with regularly did not want to ‘step on my boyfriend’s toes’ by mentoring and providing feedback to me. I was often brushed aside when I asked questions



because it was generally felt that he should be mentoring me.”

Pilot 3: “The most common display of sexism is pretty subtle: being underestimated.”

Pilot 4: “My experience with men in this community is that the majority of them are really trying not to be sexist, but there are so many ingrained behaviours that they don’t realise can be offensive. I’m working on finding grace in educating men on how some behaviour could be impactful. I really admire how many of the women use their voice to do just that.”

Sexism is actually not discussed that often on the chat groups I’m in, but having a women-only group gives a place to talk about those difficult moments when they do crop up, and work through them.

#6 Meet-ups

These chats can be a great way to ask for travelling advice, safety tips, or simply find someone to fly with on any given day. With a women-only chat, you can more easily plan a small, informal fly-in for a few female friends or begin hatching plans for larger events. In recent years we have seen a considerable uptick in the number of women-focused fly-ins across the USA.

#7 And finally...

It’s a bro-free zone. Women’s chat groups are not about excluding men, so much as having a place you feel comfortable to chat and joke in your own way. When there isn’t flying to be had, the conversation on other chats can turn locker-room pretty quickly, even to near-porn memes. Though most of us can find humour in it, when it happens all the time it can get a bit exhausting. As one friend explained: “I know I’m not the only one thankful for a space devoid of bro ego-stroking and overuse of the word epic.”

Convinced?

Convinced? Great! It’s time to start your own women-only group! You don’t have to be the raddest woman pilot in the area to create a ladies-only group (I’m certainly not) – you just have to be stoked about bringing women together to fly, chat, and learn. Invite one or two women, and let everyone start sharing the invite link.

Telegram and WhatsApp are the most popular, with GroupMe another popular option in some regions. Facebook Messenger can be a useful tool, but I find that it is not quite as great at connecting people. I find that the messenger apps tend to be a bit faster and easier to communicate with, especially if you’re trying to keep it regional. 📱

▼ MEET UP

Hiking to launch in the Swiss Alps
Photo: Andy Busslinger

