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# Aerolíneas Argentinas Cabin Crew

## Experiences and Meanings of Work in the Pandemic

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*This article analyzes the experience and construction of meaning by the all-women cabin crews of Aerolíneas Argentinas working through the pandemic during the suspension of commercial operations in 2020. Our study is centered around three themes: the (re) organization of schedules, job uncertainty, and changes in duties. These transformations in the work process generated an increase in the physical and mental workload, including emotional labor, both paid and unpaid. We offer a contribution to the theoretical discussion of the relationship between working and living conditions as a totality, framed through the lenses of critical research on occupational health and feminist theory.*

*En este artículo analizamos la experiencia y la construcción de sentidos en torno al trabajo en pandemia de las tripulaciones de Aerolíneas Argentinas durante el período de suspensión de operaciones comerciales en el año 2020. Nos enfocamos en el estudio de tres dimensiones: la (re)organización de los tiempos, la incertidumbre laboral y el cambio de tareas. Sostenemos que esas transformaciones en el proceso de trabajo generaron un aumento de la carga laboral, tanto física como mental, incluyendo el trabajo emocional, remunerado y no remunerado. Con ello, buscamos aportar a la discusión teórica acerca de la relación entre las condiciones de trabajo y de vida como una totalidad planteada por los estudios críticos de salud laboral y de las teorías feministas.*

***Keywords:*** *Labor, Aerolíneas Argentinas, Women cabin crew members, Pandemic, Working conditions*

The transportation sector carried the highest risk of COVID-19 among non-healthcare workers (World Economic Forum, 2020). The aim of this article is to analyze the experiences and perceptions of female passenger cabin crews

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working for the state-run company Aerolíneas Argentinas (AR) during the pandemic, with a focus on the first half of 2020. AR holds the largest share of the internal market: prior to the pandemic, it accounted for 61% of domestic flights and currently continues to handle 63% (ANAC, 2022). The company has 11,682 employees (Aerolíneas Argentinas, March 7, 2023, e-mail), organized into five unions according to technical function. Both the handling of transportation as well as the conception of AR's status as a public service are very susceptible to changes in national-level government (Miguel, 2021). Founded in 1950, the national Argentine airline was a centerpiece in the first Peronist administration's aviation policy (Piglia, 2020). In the early 1990s it underwent a privatization process marked by successive transfers among Spanish business groups—until 2008, when it was renationalized (Thwaites Rey, 2001; Cufré, 2018; Miguel, 2022). Under Cristina Fernández's administration (2009-2015), the flagship airline received increased public funding to ensure its continued operation, in recognition of the indispensable and overall value that the public service of commercial air transport of passengers, mail, and cargo signified for the country's development. However, starting with Mauricio Macri's term (2015-2019) in late 2015, a new presidential administration was characterized by strident questioning of the subsidiary role of the state, along with a growing legitimacy associated with society and media, particularly in the case of AR. This commercial focus was reversed during Alberto Fernández's administration (2019-2023), which affirmed AR as a bastion of healthcare policy.

The cabin crew members are workers who carry out flight security and are represented by the Asociación Argentina de Aeronavegantes (Argentine Aeronautical Association, AAA). During the pandemic, most Argentine crews were not in service for the first time in history. We will focus here on those who continued working voluntarily on the national airline's flights for repatriation and healthcare supplies or vaccines (special flights).

This research project consisted of the analysis of information obtained through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all-women cabin crew members, triangulated with secondary sources which include reports of the International Labour Organization (ILO), business, trade union, and specialized industry organization documents (OACI and IATA). In addition, we made two public information requests of the state airline and of the Agencia Nacional de Aviación Civil (National Civil Aviation Agency- ANAC). The interviews were held between October and November of 2021 with three crew members who had worked on the special flights.

The pandemic exacerbated an already-established trend consisting of the intensification of work in the airline industry being carried out globally (Gillet and Tremblay, 2021). The commercial policies implemented during the initial years of the renationalization increased the frequency of flights and the workload of AR's domestic flight crews. In 2020, the special flights introduced changes in the organization of tasks which increased the paid and unpaid workload and emotional burden of the cabin crews. In order to analyze this process, we centered the study on three themes: the organization of timeframes, job insecurity, and changes in duties.

The first section presents the theoretical framework and bibliographical background. The second section identifies the various motives that impinged

upon the decision of the crew members to participate in the healthcare and repatriation flights. Then, the third section contains three subsections which analyze the changes in the working and living conditions. The final reflections summarize the principal findings and questions emerging from the present study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We dealt with working and living conditions as a totality, as understood in the critical studies of occupational health and the framework provided by social reproduction theory. Among the former, we drew on research by the Anthropology of Argentine Labor which recoups the critiques by Latin American Social Medicine (Laurell, 1993), of the Hegemonic Medical Model (Guiamet et al., 2017; Grimberg, 2009; Margulies, 1991; Menéndez, 2005). This perspective includes the set of experiences related to health, such as discomfort, chronic pains and feelings, even when they are not recognized as occupational illnesses. The valuable studies in the field of psychology have addressed stress, anxiety and depression in cabin crews during the pandemic (Kim et al., 2022; Görlich and Stadelmann, 2020; Cahill et al., 2021). These research efforts focus on recognized professional illnesses and measurable symptoms, while our perspective centers on understanding the meanings and practices that the women workers develop in relation to their jobs and lives.

We analyzed the experiences of the crews on the basis of two themes linked to the specificity of their work: how times were structured and the traits of emotional labor. These basic elements of their job are inseparable from living conditions, since no one arrives at their job without a complex series of social processes that guarantee their existence (Bhattacharya, 2017: 2). Nor do they return home without the fatigue, pains, blows, and weariness accumulated during the workday. For this reason, an analysis from the perspective of social reproduction allows us to illustrate the multiple forms in which the spheres of production and reproduction are co-created in daily life. It allows us to expose ". . . the fictitious nature of the separation between work and social reproduction, by illustrating their co-dependence in regenerating capitalist relations" (Mezzadri, Newman, and Stevano, 2022: 1789). Focusing on the bridges between work and life also has political consequences. It sheds light on the fact that the reproduction of life that matters is that which allows for capitalist accumulation and that the discussion over which are the conditions in which life is (re)produced is related to the capital-life contradiction (Varela, 2023: 24). In the way of a concrete example: the fight for rest periods for the crew affects both the organization of all their social reproduction activities as well as their ability to ensure security on the flights—something that is crucial both for their own lives and those of the passengers.[1]

The fatigue related to flight security has been the object of studies on Human Factors in Aviation since the seventies. However, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) was the first to analyze the work of the cabin crews from a gender perspective, linking the managing of emotions to the models of femininity and socialization processes within the concept of "emotional labor." The high level

of concentration and management of one's own emotions and those of others, key components of the workload, represent a fundamental value in the service sold by the airlines.

In addition, the crew members' work is carried out in a specific temporal and spatial fashion. The workdays are changeable and are determined by a complex web of international regulations, standards of each country/region and collective labor agreements. These regulations affect the levels of fatigue and the relationship between professional and social-family life (Gillet and Tremblay, 2021). Some studies have correctly focused on showing how the emotional labor they put into play is primarily affected by the work/home balance (Schiffinger and Braun, 2020; Kumari and Aithal, 2022) and by the job insecurity connected to the precarity (Shin, Lee, and Hur, 2022). In dialogue with these studies we analyze how the changes in the organization of schedules and tasks for the special flights had a bearing on the emotional work of the crews, permeated by growing job uncertainty. Although, in our case, it was more tied to the pandemic than to precarity since the AR female workers have stable contracts. This stability differentiates them from those who work in low-cost airlines, with fixed-limit contracts and often outsourced through agencies located in countries with more flexible labor laws (Mendonça, 2020; Barnier, Calame, and Vandewattyne, 2018).

Nevertheless, the cabin crews of AR are not exempt from the trend towards intensified labor, as we have discussed in previous research efforts (Cufré, 2018; Miguel, 2022; Cufré and Engelhardt, 2024). This greater workload has hidden, unregistered consequences, such as chronic pain, feelings of physical exhaustion or alterations in sleep and menstrual cycles. The way this relationship between health and work is experienced is permeated with gender stereotypes. For example, women professional workers tend to "hide" or underestimate menstrual pains either out of shame, to avoid being seen as troublesome individuals, or to force ourselves to always be "super-powerful" women who can handle anything. Similarly, the socialization as "natural" caregivers also generates an under-registration of emotional work. Specifically in the case of the women cabin crew members, two models of femininity are embodied: on the one hand, the wife and loving mother geared towards the service, care, and attention of passengers, and on the other, the professional career woman, dressed to be seen but controlled in her behavior (Hochschild, 1983: 174). This dual nature shapes the experiences of these female workers from whom the company demands fulfillment of beauty and professionalism standards (Castelliti, 2018, 2019). The accounts of AR's crew members reveal how feelings about professional responsibility are present in the decision to fly during the pandemic. Likewise, they highlight the quest for continuity in their work and personal routines, despite the uncertainties of the health context.

## TO FLY OR NOT TO FLY

As of March 20, 2020, all domestic commercial air travel and general aviation services in Argentina were cancelled (Ministerio de Transporte de la Nación, Resolution 64/2020, March 18, 2020). The state decided to arrange for

repatriation flights to bring back Argentines stranded abroad who wished to return home. An analysis of the first phase of the pandemic found that repatriation flights and weak control of the entry of those coming from outside were problematic factors that contributed to the propagation of the virus in the country, detracting from the initial success of the health policy (Feierstein, 2021).[2]

The national airline played a key role in the repatriation flights and later in the *health flights* organized to transport medical supplies and vaccines. The Argentine Foreign Ministry oversaw these operations along with the ministries of Transportation, Interior, Health, Defense and Security. By mid-April almost 90% of Argentines had returned (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio Internacional y Culto, July 1, 2020.) The airline directed those repatriation flights (384 flights to transport 78,430 Argentines) and transported 27,462 people within the country in 160 special flights (Poleri, 2021). Behind these figures are the men and women aeronautical workers who made these flights possible. Working in the health and repatriation flights was not mandatory for the AR crews; the opportunity was presented to them as optional.

Those who belonged to any of the "risk groups" or were responsible for the care of relatives could request not to be called upon to participate in these special flights, garnering the trade union's approval (@aeronavegantescom, March 10, 2020). Thus, those who asked to remain at home were not adversely affected by deductions or salary reductions—except for the variable compensations according to flights taken—nor were they subject to any sanctions by the company. In this regard, one female crew member stated: "There, the union did a great job and I think that here, I don't know if it was the same in other countries or in other places, but they cannot complain that anyone who was afraid, that people who were afraid felt obligated because it wasn't like that, it wasn't like that" (Cabin crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021).

Moreover, the crew members who wanted to participate in the repatriation or health flights needed to proactively sign up for it. That way, the company did not have to call each individual female worker to confirm whether or not they accepted, which could have suggested a sense of pressure or intimidation. To meet the expectations of these special operations, close to 200 cabin crew members continued fulfilling a total of 2,204 effective assignments in the national airline (Aerolíneas Argentinas, e-mail, August 29, 2023.)

In discussions, we identified a sense of pride and honor linked to the voluntary participation in special flights during the pandemic. In a context where the risk of contagion was high, the responsibility of bringing home Argentines from outside the country was perceived as a contribution to society. The union underscored the willingness of those who continued flying as a gesture of solidarity with society and with colleagues who chose to remain at home for a variety of reasons (AAA, n/d).

On an individual level, we found that the decision to participate in those flights might involve two non-exclusive factors: an absence or little fear of the virus, and the satisfaction related to fulfilling an obligation amidst a complex and distressing scenario, allowing thousands of Argentines to return to the country. To quote one crew member: "The first two months everything was incredibly uncertain. Nevertheless, I kept working, I didn't care about the virus. We had colleagues who did not want to fly and we respected that. And

there was a group that wanted to fly despite all the risks and uncertainties that existed. I was part of that group. [. . .] Because I'm not a fearful person, I did take precautions, and I complied with all the requirements. [. . .] That is why I always went out to fly" (Crew member 1, Interview, October 14, 2021).

As another interviewee put it: "So I signed up on a list to indicate my desire to do repatriation flights. I understood right from the start that we had to bring those people back. . .What would happen if we all said no?" (Crew member 2, interview, October 18, 2021).

However, the decision to keep working on the special flights or not to do so, largely for fear of contagion, caused some tension within this working group. In one of the interviews, this aspect was noted as a "rift" between "volunteers" and "non-volunteers," between those who "flew" and those who "stayed home:" "It was like total volunteerism. Actually, there is a fissure between the volunteers and the non-volunteers [. . .] between those who flew and those who did not fly [. . .] As one who was in the group of volunteers, I would say that I didn't envy them anything, because for me, to stay shut in was the last thing I wanted to do. But I do think that among those who stayed home there was a certain envy, because, well, someone else did what I could not, or that I didn't dare to" (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021).

In line with the hegemonic paradigm of occupational health, this emphasis on individual commitment reinforces the business policies aimed at transferring the responsibility for health and safety to the women workers, instead of focusing on the entirety of the labor process.

## FLYING DURING A PANDEMIC

One important fact in the current phase of the industry's recovery is the increase in the rate of personnel turn-over. In the AR Businessmen's Group (including Aerolíneas Argentinas and Austral until their merger in 2020) it went from 2.3% in 2019 to 5.9% in 2022, while by mid-2023 it was already at 4.2% (Aerolíneas Argentinas, e-mail, August 29, 2023). These figures must be seen as part of a global phenomenon. The ILO (ILO, 2023) warns about the knowledge gap due to the loss of highly qualified and experienced people who were dismissed or forced into early retirement in 2020, added to the flight towards other economic activities. From our perspective, this trend can be explained by the levels of exhaustion or uncertainty caused by the pandemic, which escalated the processes of labor intensification prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

In the case of AR's passenger cabin crew members, we have identified three dimensions that marked the experience of the pandemic workers: 1) changes in the *scheduling of working times* (stemming from a contingent planning of operations and conducting flights without relay teams) and *free time* (since the alteration of the dynamic of familial organization affected the caregiving tasks); 2) growing *job insecurity* about salary payments and safeguarding their positions (threatened by measures such as the closing of Argentine branch of LATAM, and the merger of AR and Austral); 3) *changes in duties*, which affected relations with passengers and fostered self-care strategies. From the reflections and evaluations made by the women workers interviewed regarding the way in which

work during the pandemic impacted their work, family and personal life, these factors were perceived as a significant source of distress or concern.

## ORGANIZATION OF SCHEDULES

One of the most abrupt changes in the working conditions of crew members was evidenced by the disruption of work schedules in two significant ways: first, a reduction in the total number of monthly flights, and second, the extension of working hours during actual workdays, given that modified flight schedules eliminated relays and consequently shortened rest periods outside the home. The group of approximately 200 cabin crew members that continued to work on the health and repatriation flights reduced the number of hours flown per month. In this way, those who conducted repatriation and health operations flew, on average, once a month. One of the crew members interviewed pointed out that in the most critical and restrictive phase, between March and July 2020, she only had to work on six flights. These special trips were announced on the spur of the moment, with little notice: "'There is a flight to China on such-and-such a day, if you want, you can do it,' in other words, that's how it was, it was handled like that. There was no flight plan, they were not scheduled flights, it was [. . .] 'Let's see, who's here?' Sometimes it wasn't during the day, they let you know two days ahead, but it was like on the fly, it wasn't something scheduled" (Crew member 2, interview, October 18, 2021).

Furthermore, the ratio of flight days to days on land was altered due to the increase in activation of on-call staff. Compared to pre-pandemic times, starting in the first half of 2020, the frequency of on-call staff activated increased to replace workers who tested positive for COVID or had been in close contact. However, those operations signified an *extension of the workday*, as well as an intensification of the workload with respect to normal flights, as we will see further on. Rest periods or "relays" anticipated at the arrival point, which varies according to the destination and the number of hours flown, was eliminated in scheduling flights. Thus, for special operations, the AR and ANAC managers coordinated flights with two crews aboard. Each one was assigned a stretch so that the crew in charge of the outbound flight would return rested. Nonetheless, being in the plane meant "not exempt" from the work, since they were part of being in-flight. The tasks involved in attending to passengers and to the safety procedures, communications from the pilots' cabins, among others, require a high level of concentration. This transformed the type of work schedule because the pandemic signified more hours at the disposal of the company and carrying out new duties. This change in scheduling combined with the physical effects caused by the plane pressurization resulted in high levels of exhaustion. A 12-hour Buenos Aires to Madrid flight became a 24-hour flight which, added to the time invested prior to and following take off/landing and travel time to and from home, approach 28 hours on duty and wearing a mask.

Second, the ratio between working time and rest time was modified. These women employees needed to spend more time in their homes, whose family schedule dynamics were altered by the pandemic with, for example, virtual classes for the children, remote work of partners and the impossibility of finding

domestic workers or support from relatives to avoid possible contagion. We must also bear in mind that many female crew members use their discounted tickets to travel with family or friends. For workers whose social life revolves around the flight plans, this constitutes a crucial work-life balance strategy since they would spend Christmas, birthdays, and important events with their loved-ones away from home. Because of this, the ability to combine work and family life in the flights constitutes more than a company "benefit"— it is a labor right which determines how they live out their affective relationships.

Moreover, the greater availability of "free time" was identified as a factor of psychic pressure since it affected the daily unfolding of personal and family life. The balance between work and leisure—which, until then had been considered adequate—was categorically altered with the outbreak of the pandemic. On average, those who decided to work on the special flights were only assigned one service per month, which would often comprise one or two full days of work, leaving the rest of their time free until the next call. Disruption of daily routine due to an abrupt reduction in work was one of the primary sources of distress which "changed their heads" and even produced a desire (or need) to fly more often:

> I would say that up till then, I was OK; I felt a balance between leisure and work— and we call leisure the days that we were free— and it seemed pretty well balanced. [. . .] But now, we have so much time, flying so little, that this changed. It changed all of our heads. [. . .] I was working 10% of what I had before. If you want me to quantity it, I now had almost no activity. So there was that. The thing is, those who were afraid thought it was great, because they weren't working, but for those who wanted to go out and work, it did affect them because there was no work or very little of it. (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021)

"Being without work affected me a lot, a real lot. [. . .] If your routine is to go away, go away, go away and be at home 'wow' [. . .] We are kind of peculiar folks, no? I love my children deeply, I have a husband, love my kids a lot, but there's a point where. . .We're used to. . .Alone alone alone alone for a stretch, you know? [. . .] Well, uh, it affected me a lot, I was not happy, I wanted to work, I wanted to go out on those flights, I wish they had given me more" (Crew member 2, interview, October 18, 2021).

We should also point out that although the crew members were by decree exempt from the obligation to maintain quarantine after returning from a flight, those who lived with relatives often had to isolate themselves in other rooms or even in other homes to protect their loved ones, adding yet another concern to an overall state of uncertainty.

## JOB INSECURITY

In the face of the unprecedented drop in the level of activity and income in the sector, female AR cabin crew members were struck with severe job uncertainty around maintaining their salaries and safeguarding their positions. First of all, their salary consists of several variable items tied to productivity (such

as hours flown and travel expenses), which was diminished by about one third. Receiving the basic salary ("sueldo pelado") meant a drastic reduction in their incomes (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021), which was not compensated by any bonus from the company or the state for the special flights. In addition, in mid-2020, the AR management attempted to arrange for a 25% salary reduction. After negotiations with AAA, the company agreed to maintain the full take-home salary of cabin crew members in June and July. Nonetheless, this negotiation also entailed suspensions of 40% of the employees in order to avoid paying social secutiry contributions (@aeronavegantescom, July 8, 2020).

While crew members who continued providing services still received their regular base salary, those who were suspended were compensated non-remuneratively. The year-end bonus was not affected (even for those who were suspended), nor were contributions to healthcare, future retirement assets calculations, seniority, or pay grades. Another source of distress came with uncertainty about the future of the national airline and fear of a possible job loss in light of the shrinkage of air transportation owing to COVID-19. On May 5th the merger of Austral with AR had been announced as an initial response to the crisis caused by the pandemic, along with a heavy internal restructuring to improve productivity and increase the company's saving, by eliminating duplicate structures, unifying salary scales and modifying collective bargaining agreements (Cufré and Miguel, 2020; Cufré and Miguel, 2021). Although AR women employees were the ones interviewed for this study, the measure could have also generated discontent among female Austral employees, who were limited to making domestic flights only and had seen their flight activity greatly reduced. These factors, in the framework of the usual critiques of one sector of politics, society and the media aimed at the "expense" to the public purse represented by AR (Miguel, 2021; Miguel and Luna, 2021), fueled fears that they lose employment. In any case, as the following excerpt suggests, this situation was compensated by a certain reassurance or security provided by working in a company of the size and importance of AR: "Like, on the one hand, I felt sort of. . .safe in this gigantic company. I think they're going to take care of this giant company. . .There are a lot of us, no? And it's useful in a lot of places, it's necessary for a lot of things. We were making these flights [. . .] but on the other hand, [. . .] It's a huge expense. I wonder, how long can it hold up?" (Crew member 2, interview, October 18, 2021). This environment of uncertainty did not translate into an active dynamic of labor conflict in the company. By surveying all labor disputes carried out by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Social Security (MTEySS) during the 2020-2021 period, we identified only one dispute driven by AAA in March of 2020, which involved all airlines they represented, not just AR.

Despite the initial chaos characterized by a lack of supply deliveries and primitive early protocols for procedures of secure employment, the interviewees emphasized that they found the measures taken by AR in terms of elements for personal protection sufficient relative to the risks associated with the pandemic: "To me there was always a desire to take care of us. . ..on the part of the company. No, no. . .They never expected us to fly in unsafe conditions" (Crew member 2, Interview, October 18, 2021). In fact, one of the women interviewed

holds a union representative position and, in addition to agreeing with this appraisal of the performance of AR in the protection of the men and women aeronautical workers, admitted that the union had been limited in its efforts or intervention given the company's compliance: "Later there wasn't much to do because afterwards the company did it right away. [. . .] In other words, it always complied with the hygiene and safety measures" (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021). The union stressed that the organization's priority was aimed at following up on the implementation of the health policies in order to undertake the repatriation flights (AAA, n/d).

In any case, the spread of infections among cabin crews were inevitable. Although as stated in the interviews, they believed that the origin was linked to widespread circulation of the virus through their social and family life, the plane was the principal locus of risk for the crews. Its physical characteristics in terms of confined space contributed to the spread of the virus via already infected passengers who boarded the plane and often disregarded the safety protocol.[3]

## CHANGES IN DUTIES

As was pointed out earlier, principal changes in the organization of work remained in effect for extended periods of time. Likewise, specific tasks were added related to health protocols with respect to passengers and among the workers. One distinguishing element was the modification of the on-board beverage and food service. Given that consumption was only permitted on the return leg of the repatriation flights, part of the crew members' workload was reduced. Nevertheless, those return flights represented the time of greatest risk of contracting the virus because the passengers were allowed to remove their face masks.

Another task added to the daily labor was the constant verification of the correct use of face masks, as well as controlling traffic in the aisles in order to avoid a pile-up of people waiting in line for bathroom: "Those are things that are customary for us. I check that your seat belt is fastened, that you have a tray and now I have to look at your face to see if you're wearing the mask" (Crew member 2, Interview, October 18, 2021). These new duties impacted relations with the passengers by fostering various tense situations. On repeated occasions, the workers had to deal with episodes in which some passengers refused to comply with the norms, placing the health of every person in the cabin at risk. The primary trigger of moments of heightened tension was usually created when the crew members detected that there were people with symptoms and announced it to passengers (Cronista, March 19, 2020). Arguments also began among passengers over incorrect use of the mask (for example, if the mask covered the mouth but not the nose) in which the crew had to intervene, or even incidents of abuse directed at the women workers when they demanded its proper placement. Since passengers frequently took advantage of the exception in the use of the face covering to eat or drink, controlling use of the mask when it entails a challenge to the crew's authority was noted as one of the most difficult tasks: "The issue of masks in the plane is awful, because passengers

come up to you and say, 'this guy doesn't have a mask on.' The passengers are real tattletales—I'll explain—who create situations where they tell you no, 'this can't stand'—he leaves and then the one who wasn't wearing the mask says to you, 'no, it's because I was drinking something,' and all these arguments start" (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021).

As part of the pandemic working protocol, crew members wore face masks and gloves in addition to their uniforms. Those who served on international flights had to spend long days with the mask on (for example, counting from the time they left their homes until they arrived at the hotel, they may have had to keep a mask on continually for nearly 14 hours.) Other measures implemented by the company included distributing alcohol gel and disinfecting liquids for use in cleaning various surfaces of the plane and the continual replacement of pillows and blankets for use by the crew. They also had the option of wearing a protective suit when a passenger showed symptoms of COVID-19 and needed assistance.

In a world which still was not prepared to deal with the pandemic, initially the company did not have basic items such as masks and alcohol gel. AR began to provide the crew members with personal protective equipment after a month, once they had managed to systematize the supply of sanitary supplies: "I would take my own mask, I had gloves which I took if I had them in my house because sometimes the suppliers were out of stock everywhere, sometimes you'd go to a pharmacy and there weren't any. And with such a large company, which has to buy in great volume, sometimes there weren't any. But it wasn't a matter of neglect, it was because of the context" (Crew member 1, Interview, October 14, 2021). Thus, amid the imbalances in the prevailing context during the early weeks, the cabin crews had to take their own personal protection equipment. They also saw a need for collective care strategies for which there were no regulations yet, such as the exclusive use of one of the plane's bathrooms to reduce the risk involved in shared use with the passengers: "[. . .] now it's procedural, but at the beginning we did it ourselves because it did not seem logical for us to use the same bathroom as the passengers who were coming from the outside" (Crew member 1, interview, October 14, 2021). Only after the women employees had implemented this procedure on their own did the company end up recognizing the need to establish a toilet exclusively for the crew.

Likewise, serving the public requires multiple skills having to do with emotional work associated with management of conflicts and emotions. Added to the already known behavior associated with fear of flying and its anxieties was a world-wide uncertainty about a highly contagious and mortal virus. We underscore this element not as a mere component of the context, but rather as a determining factor in the state of mind of those who were flying and therefore, for the efforts of the cabin crews. Even when it is difficult to quantify, relationships with the passengers are one of the factors most likely to impact the type of workday the crew member will have. And although there is no information on what those passengers were like, data does exist on the increase in the so-called "disruptive passengers" (IAIA, 2023)—that is, those whose confrontational attitude places the safety of the flight at risk: an indicator of this qualitative transformation in the work of the women cabin crew members.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have explored the everyday experiences and construction of meaning for women cabin crew members who worked in the health and repatriation flights of Argentines in 2020. We identified three main themes in our analysis of the transformations in work procedures and how they are linked to life experience: 1) the organization of work schedules, 2) job uncertainty, and 3) the changes in duties.

The special flights were organized through an extension of the workday, without a rest period on land between outbound and return legs. Moreover, the reduced frequency of the flights translated into a greater number of days off, which functioned as a source of distress or psychic pressure for the crews. The desire to fly more often and the powerlessness felt through not being able to do so because of the restrictive context, not only signified intense job insecurity regarding payment of salaries and the preservation of their positions, but also spotlighted the strong affectivity running through the cabin crew in fulfilling their responsibilities. The pride in carrying out this task and assuring the safety of the passengers is an integral component in the professional identity of this line of work. Additionally, it operates as a mechanism to transfer business responsibilities, for example, when the women provide their own protective gear.

A second element that stands out in crew members' decision to fly during the pandemic is the need to maintain a certain normalcy in the way they live, specifically related to their individual space and times. Increased leisure time with restrictions on mobility, the introduction of remote work, and virtual education also had an impact on the organization of family time. The testimonies that referred to the desire to fly more because they were not accustomed to spending so many hours at home, following a routine that felt strange to them, underscores the little explored disturbance in the work life/family balance. Changes in the organization of work schedules and consequently, family time, thereby raises a question about how work (or in this case, flying) represented an escape route in light of the increase in unpaid emotional labor related to the tasks of social reproduction carried out by women in a pandemic.

Working conditions of those who continued to fly suffered glaring transformations in terms of the length of the workday and the workload. That experience was permeated with uncertainty regarding job continuity, the future of commercial aviation, and the extension of the pandemic itself. Specifically, at the beginning of the pandemic, the lack of knowledge about the virus and the remote prospect of a vaccine, combined with suspensions and layoffs in other airlines around the world, along with the merger and reductions in AR and the bankruptcy of LATAM, its primary competitor in the market. All these elements formed an uncertain scenario the women workers had to face while adapting to new protocols and work procedures.

Concretely, with respect to the cabin crew's duties, the company reorganized the work process of the cabin crew with the goal of assuring compliance with safety protocols. In the repatriation flights, the food and beverage service was restricted in order to reduce the risk of contagion. This first measure eliminated the task connected to the preparation and delivery of the on-board service.

However, the reorganization of duties signified an intensification of the workload given that the crew members had to constantly check for the proper use of masks and the flow of passengers in the aisles to avoid hazardous build-ups. On repeated occasions, safeguarding the security protocol brought about tense situations with passengers who resisted compliance. We believe that this led to a qualitative change in the crews' jobs because it involved an increase in responsibilities that placed them in a position of having to manage emotions in the face of a new type of passenger, nervous and frightened by the virus. In this sense, the relationship with the passengers constituted another element of mental burden during the pandemic.

These modifications in the schedules and type of work went far beyond the airplane. The changes in the organization of work on the special flights, in addition to the overall pandemic situation, constituted a reorganization of the use of free time, as well as the tasks of family care and other activities of social life. As previously mentioned, the burden of paid emotional work aboard the planes and the unpaid work at home intensified. The case of the women cabin crew members shows how work and life conditions form part of a whole that must be studied in a cohesive manner. What seems abstract in theoretical terms, such as the interrelation between spheres of production and reproduction, have concrete effects on how the relationship between workers and occupational health is understood. In the interdependence of both realms a series of experiences emerge which the hegemonic model does not take into account until they are manifestly expressed in a symptom or specific pathology. Analyzing these everyday and prior invisible dimensions aid us in reflecting on and building a perspective of occupational health focused on prevention. Furthermore, it allows for considering trade union strategies that question the under-estimation of the effects of emotional work. The levels of weariness produced by labor intensification within and outside of the workplace is reflected in the indicators of absenteeism, resignations or the flight of aeronautical workers towards other sectors. In the case of AR, the data on the rise in post-pandemic personnel turnover exhibits a tendency whose in-depth study constitutes a line for future research.

## NOTES

1. The pandemic displayed the severity of this contradiction. In numerous reports, the ILO (2020) and CEPAL (2020) referred to the deepening of the gender inequalities caused by the pandemic in light of the overlapping of care and the paid workday and because the "essential" activities of care, education and health are highly feminized. At the local level, the Dirección Nacional de Economía, Igualdad y Género (2020) produced a report calculating the contribution to GDP of domestic work and unpaid care and its evolution during COVID-19. Likewise, a variety of valuable works emerged in the academic realm. Particularly relevant is the work of Mezzadri, Newman, and Stevano (2022), given that they developed methodological contributions to social reproduction theory in analyzing the pandemic.

2. In contrast to the "mitigation" strategy followed by Argentina—that is, to allow the pandemic to circulate while attempting to control it with quarantine so as not to overwhelm the health system—Feierstein (2021) maintains that the "elimination" strategy implemented largely in the Asia/Pacific region was the most effective because it did not control the population but rather those who moved about.

3. All throughout 2020, the work of cabin crews around the entire world entailed a high exposure level to the virus, especially given that only a small percentage of the global population had been vaccinated. In Argentina, vaccination of the crew members began in mid-2021 (AAA, n/d).

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