



Wings of Resistance: A Case Study

Ashley Hemrich

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College, Indiana (USA)

Sofia Maria Lamas Knust

Universidad Americana, Asuncion, Paraguay

Melanie Samudio Caballero

Universidad Americana, Asuncion, Paraguay

Abstract

Background: This case study explores Letizia Ruiz Fonseca's groundbreaking journey, highlighting her firsthand experiences as she navigated a male-dominated aviation industry. Through her detailed accounts, it examines the challenges, triumphs, and resilience that shaped her career. **Objectives:** To analyse the pioneering achievements of Letizia Ruiz Fonseca, Paraguay's first female pilot to earn international licenses and captain a commercial airline, as a case study in gender barriers within aviation. **Learning Outcomes:** Learners will critically examine ethics, leadership, and gender equity issues in South America. They will discuss the systematic challenges faced by women in male-dominated industries and explore strategies for fostering inclusivity and equity in professional environments.

Use: Having a better understanding of gender norms. **Teaching Notes:** Suggested class format, structured discussion questions, guided reflection questions, interviews with Letizia Ruiz Fonseca, and case-based ethical dilemmas and leadership analysis.

Keywords: Gender, Gender Equality, Aviation Industry, Paraguay, Leadership Under Adversity, Workplace Harassment, Systemic Discrimination, Inclusive Leadership

GLI classification: 70

Target Audience: Suitable for upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses in Leadership Studies, Gender & Diversity in Organizations, Aviation Ethics, Organizational Behaviour, or Global Management.

Paper type: Case Study

Case Background

This case study explores the real-life journey of Letizia Ruiz Fonseca, the first female pilot in Paraguay to earn international aviation licenses and serve as a commercial airline captain. Through her firsthand experiences, it provides a detailed account of the gender-based challenges she encountered, including systemic discrimination, abuse, and institutional neglect in the aviation industry. Fonseca's story highlights remarkable personal resilience and highlights the broader structural barriers that still limit women's progress in male-dominated fields.

By analysing her lived experiences, this case study explores key themes of ethics, leadership, and gender equity, emphasizing the urgent need for institutional reform and inclusive policies that provide protective support to women in professional settings. It contributes to ongoing discussions about social justice, workplace equity, and leadership accountability in South America. It offers valuable insights for scholars, policymakers, educators, and advocates committed to promoting gender equality and ethical leadership worldwide.

Case Synopsis

This case study investigates the life and career of Letizia Ruiz Fonseca, the first woman in Paraguay to obtain international aviation licenses and command a commercial airline. By leveraging her firsthand experiences, the study underscores the considerable gender-based obstacles she encountered, including systemic discrimination, abuse, and institutional disregard due to her gender. Fonseca's journey represents the wider struggles faced by women in male-dominated fields, particularly aviation in South America. Through her narrative, the case study examines personal resilience, ethical leadership, and the necessity of institutional reform. It also assesses how her determination inspired change within her profession and altered societal views of women in leadership positions. This case study offers a compelling perspective on the complexities of gender equity, the limitations of current support systems, and the transformative potential of individual action in promoting systemic change in South America.

Background & Case Story

Childhood Dreams and Early Aspirations

Letizia Ruiz Fonseca always dreamed of flying. As a child, born on March 23, 1975, in Paraguay, she imagined herself in many roles, but, being born during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, knew her gender would limit her opportunities.

When she was little, she wanted to be an astronaut and told her older brother about it, but he said, "You weren't born in the United States, and you're female." While watching movies, she aspired to be an FBI agent. Again, her brother said, "You weren't born in the United States, and still female." Letizia knew from an early age that gender inequality was deeply rooted in Paraguay's history—a legacy shaped by decades of patriarchal norms, limited access to education for women, and systemic barriers that marginalized female voices in politics, labour, and society.

Then, as she grew older, she wanted to be a CIA agent. Her older brother told her, “Well, for that, you must be the best at everything. And one day they will tap you on the shoulder and say, Do you want to be in the CIA?” So, at school, she behaved well, looking around, thinking that at any moment someone would tap her on the shoulder to say, “Do you want to be a CIA agent?” Never, never in her life has anyone ever tapped her on the shoulder.

When she was six years old, she went to the airport to say goodbye to her father, who was traveling to Chile. She saw the plane take off, and for her, that was a passion. It was love at first sight. She came home running, and one can imagine what it is like when one wants something so passionately.

But something clicked when she watched her father take off on a plane at the airport when she was six. She will never forget how, as a young girl around 10 or 12, her brother Alfredo brought her a newspaper and handed it to her because it was about the first female commercial pilot in Germany. “I want to fly,” she told her brother Alfredo. “Then you’ll be the first,” he said.

Breaking Barriers in Aviation

By the age of eighteen, Letizia Ruiz had already achieved what many only dream of. While still a student at Goethe Schule in Paraguay, without her parents' support, she had to take out a loan from the Dirección Nacional de Aeronáutica Civil (DINAC), cosigned by her aunt and then a fellow (male military) student. The military student cosigned for her loans after learning that she had been turned down because she was not in the military (where she was also turned away from admission).

This is how she was able to afford her education; she was the first woman civilian to receive support from DINAC. She soon became a licensed civil pilot and was fluent in five languages—German, English, Portuguese, Spanish, and Guaraní. Her classmates, who aspired to become doctors, politicians, or business leaders, laughed when she declared she wanted to be a pilot. But Letizia was undeterred. She was already living her dream, flying planes while still in high school.

Her daily routine was a testament to her discipline and ambition. After school, she would attend language classes, practice piano, play tennis, paint, and then head to the Adrián Jara Institute to train as a pilot. She earned her Professional Aeronautics Certificate (PAC) for visual flight operations. She soon began working toward her Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) license, which allows pilots to fly using only instruments, without relying on visual cues—a significant milestone in aviation (San Lorenzo PY, 2015).

In the 1990s, Letizia became the first woman in Paraguay to earn an Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) license, making her the country's first female pilot qualified to fly solely by instrument reference rather than by sight (La Nación, 2017; ABC, 2017). Her achievements did not stop there. She became the first female commander to obtain a Transport License for Airline (TLA) for international commercial flights. She was also part of the first all-female flight, entirely operated by women, in Paraguay. Despite facing numerous barriers in a male-dominated field, Letizia's determination and excellence drove her forward.

Her journey is a testament to personal triumph and a powerful example of breaking gender barriers in aviation, marked by resilience, talent, and unwavering dedication. In June 2015, she received national recognition from the Paraguayan government during a session of Congress. She was honoured as the first female Paraguayan pilot to achieve several historic milestones in aviation (La Nacion, 2017; ABC, 2017).

These included becoming the first woman in Paraguay to serve as a commercial airline captain with an international transport license, the first female commercial airline pilot, the first woman certified for instrument flight operations, and the first female pilot to command a commercial flight. This prestigious recognition garnered both national and international media attention, highlighting her groundbreaking contributions to aviation in Paraguay.

Personal Life and Parallel Struggles

Letizia Ruiz faced ridicule and disbelief from the beginning of her journey. As early as school, peers laughed at her ambitions, telling her she would never make it. This scepticism evolved into something far more sinister once she entered the aviation profession. Letizia endured relentless abuse from male colleagues—pilots who grabbed her by the uniform and threw her to the ground in front of passengers and crew. Despite these public humiliations, she would pick herself up, compose herself, and continue in silence, building a mental “bubble” to survive.

The abuse escalated to physical assaults, verbal insults, and humiliation. Insults were made in front of flight attendants, other pilots, and even passengers. Demeaning comments were spoken in front of crew members, and she was shoved in front of flight attendants, passengers, and fellow pilots. Letizia internalized the trauma, retreating into her mental defenses and continuing her duties as if nothing had happened. She was routinely subjected to degrading slurs, including being called a “chipera”—a term used to demean her by referencing a lower-status job. Her male colleagues mocked her openly, calling her a “cheap little bitch” and questioning her presence in the cockpit.

In the cockpit, she was physically assaulted and yelled at during flights, to the point that flight attendants thought fights were happening. She was pushed into hotel lobbies and airplane aisles, often still in her full uniform, in front of passengers and crew. On one flight, a captain intentionally sabotaged her landing by giving her conflicting commands, only to criticize her afterward in front of all fourteen passengers.

In 2009, Letizia was one of five candidates considered for a commander role. However, she was coerced into signing a false testimony, which resulted in her not being selected.

Determined to expose wrongdoing within the aviation sector and the commander-in-chief's ranking system, she travelled to aviation headquarters in Brazil to voice her concerns. Although she was assured that the issues she raised would be addressed, it was already too late—her superiors had learned of her complaint. As a result, she was denied the commander position.

Her mental and physical health began to decline, leading to a six-month rest period. The stress gradually affected her, initially unnoticed, as her mind started to weaken,

feeling like her screws were coming loose. When Letizia inquired about her situation after the rest and whether she could resume flying, she was informed that she should be retired due to a permanent disability, given the seriousness of her health condition. She also occasionally had trouble speaking and getting off the plane.

Soon, her legs began to give out. How many times had she gotten off the plane in a wheelchair? She would tell the co-pilot, “You know what? I hit myself with the suitcase. My back hurts. I am going to request a wheelchair.” When the commander asked what was happening, she said, “No, I’m not requesting a wheelchair.” However, the truth was that her legs were not working. So, she would quietly tell the co-pilot, “Just go ahead, I’ll get a wheelchair.” She would say to the doctor and the nurse, “Please, don’t tell anyone that I can’t move my legs.”

Eventually, Letizia was diagnosed with burnout syndrome, and her body began to tell her it was time to quit flying.

Despite the guarantees of gender equality outlined in Article 46 of the Paraguayan Constitution and the Labor Code (Law No. 213/1993), which mandates equal treatment regarding wages and promotions. Unfortunately, Letizia was unable to secure the rights and fair treatment she deserved. As a pioneer in her profession, she would lack the necessary policies and protections against harassment and derogatory treatment, leaving her vulnerable to discrimination.

The Turning Point: Seeking Help and Legal Action

Letizia Ruiz endured persistent and deeply traumatic abuse throughout her aviation career. Despite being surrounded by colleagues and supervisors, no one intervened as she was routinely subjected to verbal assaults, public humiliation, and even physical abuse. Even in social settings like hangar barbecues, she was targeted with cruel remarks meant to belittle her intelligence and professionalism. One commander came up to her, lowered his head to her ear, and said, “What the hell are you laughing at, you pathetic little wretch? You do not know a damn thing. What gives you the right to be here?” Despite these relentless verbal attacks, Letizia preserved her composure, responding with unshakable dignity and professionalism, even as she endured emotional harm and intentional exclusion.

She stood at a crossroads. She could stay silent and preserve what remained of her career. Or she could speak out—risking her reputation, safety, and legacy—to expose the truth. A third option—reporting internally—had long since proven futile.

Conclusion

This case study of Letizia Ruiz Fonseca’s pioneering journey in aviation thoroughly examines gender equity, leadership, and ethical challenges in male-dominated industries. By analysing her experiences, readers gain insight into the systemic barriers that women face, including workplace harassment, institutional neglect, and broader structural discrimination. Fonseca’s resilience highlights the importance of protective policies and inclusive leadership frameworks that promote equitable professional environments.

This case effectively achieves its learning objectives through classroom discussions, interviews, and ethical analyses, encouraging critical engagement with gender norms in South America and beyond. Comparative studies of female aviation pioneers in other regions further highlight the global nature of these challenges, emphasizing both progress and ongoing gaps in gender equity.

Data from student reflections and facilitated discussions will show that this case effectively enhances discussion and understanding of leadership during adversity, ethical decision-making, and institutional reform. Similar case studies from international contexts that examine women's breakthroughs in STEM, aviation, law, and corporate leadership offer additional perspectives that enrich the discourse on gender equity. This case study is a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and industry professionals aiming to promote gender-inclusive policies and leadership practices. By applying lessons learned from Fonseca's journey and similar cases worldwide, readers are encouraged to critically assess existing frameworks and advocate for meaningful institutional change.

Case Study Questions

1. What would you have done if you were in Letizia's position?
2. What ethical responsibilities would organizations have in preventing and addressing harassment?
3. How could people manage personal risk, like mental and physical well-being, while pursuing their goals of justice?
4. What systemic changes could be implemented to support whistleblowers in male-dominated industries?

Teaching Materials

All teaching materials can be found in the accompanying teaching notes document. Please request the teaching notes by email Arete@smwc.edu.

This case study follows the journey of Letizia Ruiz Fonseca, Paraguay's first female commercial airline captain, as she navigates a career filled with groundbreaking achievements and systemic abuse. It presents a powerful ethical dilemma: whether to remain silent in the face of harassment or risk everything to speak out.

For a thorough discussion to be presented, it is essential for those teaching this case study to consider all the interviews (4) completed with one of the researchers and the pilot for whom this case study is intended. The above quotations come from Letizia Ruiz, who was interviewed by Sofia Maria Lamas Knust, and then translated into English by Melanie Samudio Caballero. Ashley Hemrich further translated into English and fixed the grammar for publication.

This case aims to help students analyse ethical dilemmas within professional settings, recognize the effects of systemic gender discrimination, assess the risks and repercussions of whistleblowing, and suggest institutional reforms to enhance equity and accountability.

The case is applicable to undergraduate and graduate students pursuing studies in business ethics, gender studies, human resource management, aviation, STEM fields, or leadership and organizational behaviour.

Suggested Class Format

Total Time: 60–90 minutes

Segment	Activity	Time
1	Case Reading (pre-class or in-class)	15–20 min
2	Small Group Discussion	20–30 min
3	Class wide Debrief	20–30 min
4	Reflection	10–15 min

Discussion Questions

1. What could you do if you were in Letizia's position?
 - Explore personal values, risk tolerance, and ethical reasoning.
2. What ethical responsibilities could Letizia's employer have?
 - Discuss duty of care, HR protocols, and leadership accountability.
3. What ways can organizations foster safer environments for underrepresented groups in a male-dominated culture like Paraguay?
 - Consider training, reporting mechanisms, and cultural change.
4. What could the risks and benefits associated with whistleblowing be?
 - Analyze from personal, professional, and societal perspectives.
5. How could a toxic culture affect workplace dynamics?
 - Reflect on machismo, institutional silence, and global parallels.

References

- ABC Color. (2017). Víctima del machismo: Primera mujer piloto tuvo que renunciar. *ABC Color*. <https://www.abc.com.py/nacionales/victima-del-machismo-primera-mujer-piloto-tuvo-que-renunciar-1635001.html>
- La Nacion. (2017). Mi mayor pecado es haber nacido mujer. *La Nación*. <https://www.lanacion.com.py/pais/2017/09/27/letizia-ruiz-fonseca-mi-mayor-pecado-es-haber-nacido-mujer>
- San Lorenzo PY. (2015). El Senado entregó placa de reconocimiento a Koki Ruíz y piloto paraguaya. *San Lorenzo del Paraguay*. <https://www.sanlorenzopy.com/30908/el-senado-entrego-placa-de-reconocimiento-a-koki-ruiz-y-piloto-paraguaya/>

About the authors:



My name is Ashley Hemrich, and I am from Paris, Illinois. I have two wonderful boys who have supported me over the past ten years. I am currently in the dissertation phase of my doctoral program in Global Leadership. With a background in political science and public administration, I have been extremely interested in change management, vertical or shared leadership, and resilience. Working on a case study with international students was not only a pleasure but also an honour. Learning from diverse cultures around the world has opened my eyes to the injustices many people face, globally.



My name is Sofía María Lamas Knust, and I am originally from Asunción, Paraguay. I am currently working toward a degree in Commercial Engineering at Universidad Americana. As a student deeply interested in innovation, global impact, and leadership, I was especially drawn to this project and Letizia's pioneering role in aviation. Working on this case study allowed me to see how resilience, vision, and purpose can lead to meaningful change. I am passionate about combining strategy and creativity in my future career and hope to continue learning from inspiring leaders like Letizia.



My name is Melanie Samudio Caballero, and I am from Greater Asunción, Paraguay. I am currently studying Marketing and Advertising at Universidad Americana. I have a strong interest in how communication influences social change, especially in areas like gender equality and leadership. This project gave me the chance to explore the often-unspoken struggles of leadership and purpose-driven work, and how these ideas relate to broader societal impacts. I learned a lot through collaborating with others and learning about Letizia's professional journey and the challenges she encountered. This experience has increased my curiosity, pushed me to expand my limits, and inspired me to continue growing both personally and professionally.

Acknowledgments:

We gratefully acknowledge Professor Marcelo Echague Pastore, Dr. Jennie Mitchell, and Dr. Dan Hiltz for their invaluable support. This publication was made possible through their guidance and through the unwavering encouragement we gave each other throughout the journey.

GLI classification: 70

Paper type: Case Study

Received: June 24, 2025 **Accepted:** July 17, 2025