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# **‘GET YOURSELF A PROPER JOB GIRLIE!’: RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND WOMEN SEAFARERS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The world wide shortage of trained officers has received considerable media attention. The 2000 BIMCO/ ISF report on labour trends reported a 4% shortage in the current global supply of officers, with a predicted increase to 12% by 2010 (ISF/BIMCO, 2000). In the European Union alone, there was reported to be a shortage of approximately 13, 000 officers in 2001, a figure that has been predicted to more than double by 2006 (FST/ECSA 1999). To date, women account for only a very small proportion of qualified officers, for example, the UK officers’ union NUMAST reported that, in January 2000, women accounted for just 1.4 percent of its total membership of over 19,500 (NUMAST, 2000). The IMO report that women account for only between one or two percent of the 1.25 million seafarers in the world (IMO, 1992). As such women represent an untapped resource for crewing the world fleet and addressing the current labour shortage. Indeed the IMO noted that women are an ‘under-utilised and underdeveloped resource which could provide part of the solution to the problem of crewing the future world merchant fleets’ (IMO, 1997: 3). A view reflected in a communication to the European Commission which states that ‘[The social partners] should make every effort to promote and facilitate women’s access to the seafaring professions, [...]’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2001: 13) and in a later OECD report on the availability and training of seafarers, which recommended that ‘greater encouragement should be given to female entrants to the industry’ (OECD, 2003: 9).

This paper will explore the issue of women’s employment at sea in view of the current and predicted labour shortage within the industry. Drawing on in-depth interviews it will consider the attitudes and experiences of maritime employers regarding the employment of women seafarers and in doing this will highlight and examine popular myths regarding women’s employment alongside employers’ actual

experiences of employing women as deck and engineering officers. This section will be followed by a consideration of the accounts of women seafarers in order to explore women's experiences as seafarers and maritime employees. The paper will conclude with a discussion of these data and a series of recommendations to promote the participation and retention of women in the maritime industry.

## **METHODS**

This paper reports on data collected in 2001 as part of an ILO commissioned study on women seafarers<sup>1</sup> (Belcher et al., 2003). The study involved qualitative and quantitative interviews with women seafarers, human resource managers of shipping companies, union officials, international regulatory bodies and trade unions in over thirty countries worldwide. Data were collected on both the cargo and cruise sectors of the industry, and included those involved with both the marine (deck and engine) and hotel and catering (cruise vessels) departments. This paper will focus on the employment of women in the marine departments of both cruise and cargo vessels, and in particular will draw on 22 depth interviews with senior executives of ship owning and ship management companies in North America, Europe and Asia and in-depth interviews with women, of a range of nationalities, working in the marine departments of a variety of vessels.

## **COMPANY PERSPECTIVES**

The company officials interviewed for this study had a range of experience in terms of the employment of women seafarers. Some reported having had no experience of women as crewmembers, others' experience was limited to women in non-officer roles as stewards or assistant cooks and yet others described considerable experience as employers of numbers of women in senior officer ranks.

The interview data suggested that a number of myths or misconceptions regarding women seafarers continue to pervade the shipping industry. One common

misconception was related to ideas of 'appropriate' jobs for men and women. This notion is based on stereotyped beliefs and understandings regarding people's skills, abilities and characteristics, based solely on their gender. Historically, 'women's work' has been typically seen as that which involves 'caring' and 'expression of feeling' (Spencer and Podmore, 1987) and 'routine, less visible and more monotonous components of work' (Homans, 1987). Such gendered stereotypes regarding appropriate work tasks and workplaces were found to be held by some employers, based on ideas about 'natural' differences between men and women. As one employer noted:

Girls and boys are different, man and woman are different, for example, boys are braver than girls, and this is important, because this has an impact on decision making, you have to make critical decisions when you sail at sea.

Some employers held the view that seafaring was simply too 'difficult' and employment conditions too harsh for it to be a suitable career for women. As one employer stated:

I must say we are not willing to recruit the m. It's too [much] trouble to have them. As you know, seafarers work and life at sea is very hard, there is no comparison between their work, working conditions and conditions on land. Seafaring is a male profession; man should do this.

Others felt that women could work at sea but only aboard certain ships and only in positions that did not conflict with notions of femininity, thus women could work aboard cruise or passenger vessels in positions such as assistant cook, radio officer, steward or in hotel and catering departments. In particular, the engine room, with its associated images of 'heat, dirt and sweat' and 'heavy' physically demanding work tasks, was seen as the least suitable area for women's employment. As two employers stated:

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<sup>1</sup> Data were collected by Phil Belcher, Helen Sampson, Michelle Thomas, Jaime Veiga and Minghua Zhao.

Another reason is because the work on the ship is just too hard. It's ok if the woman works at bridge--- as the navigator – but there is no way for her to work in the engine room, it's just too hard for her. Even if you have half man and half woman in the engine room, I can ensure you that at the end of the day, the hard work will have to be done by the males.

Women can work only for, as assistant cooks, as assistant [mess] boys. For officers I don't think so.

Negative attitudes to the employment of women also related to perceptions of women's role in the family and associated concerns regarding beliefs about the incompatibility of a sea career and marriage and motherhood. The expectation that women seafarers were more likely than their male counterparts to leave the sea early, specifically once they married and /or had children, was associated with a subsequent belief that women seafarers constituted a poor investment in terms of training and development. As one European shipowner stated:

Because you see women, maybe when we go on a ship they will find somebody, make love and maybe to marry and that's it. Will stop right there. And so the circle continue.

Related to this was a further concern occasionally expressed by employers that the presence of women on ships could lead to sexual tensions and jealousy amongst male crew members, thus threatening effective working relationships.

Employers who held negative views of women seafarers came from both European and Asian countries. These employers frequently had in common the fact that they had little or no experience employing women seafarers as marine crew. There were, also, however, a number of companies, from a number of world regions, who did not share these negative views and indeed we found that those companies who had employed women seafarers were generally very positive about the experience. These employers frequently spoke highly of the professional performance of the women seafarers they employed. As one employer noted:

They're more alert. I hate to say they're more intelligent because I don't make intelligence tests with them [but ..] they're more engaged you know.

Indeed, some employers stated that they felt women performed better in their jobs than their male counterparts. This was sometimes attributed to the difficulties and prejudices that women encountered during their training and careers which were felt to lead to women becoming more determined to succeed. As two employers commented:

They were good because they were (a) there was always a target in front of them, they always wanted to beat the male side of things, and no, it's a good target, and they all achieved it without doubt.

The girls that have made it I look at them and I talk to some of my friends who have worked with them, and the conclusion is that the girls who get up to that job are extremely determined, are very focussed on what they do. You know whatever problems they encounter, they will not push them from the tracks. So if I was about to employ a Second Engineer or a Chief Engineer who was a woman and who has the knowledge of offshore work and all that, I think I would choose her. If she's come this far, then I know I'm going to get somebody who is very determined to do the job well who is not there to muck around, who would have the right attitudes.

In contrast to concerns about women introducing sexual tensions, these company officials reported that the presence of women on board could actively improve the morale and atmosphere on board, promoting a more 'normal' environment for the crew to live and work within. With many seafarers working tours of duty of 4 months or longer, and often with few opportunities to go ashore, the more balanced environment of a mixed sex ship could be of considerable significance. As one employer noted:

The advantage is on board, all of a sudden, the whole language changes to the positive. Very positive. It's nothing like the good old English "Oi!" it's not that. There is a "please" all of the sudden, and even between the male community, everything changes. It has changed – no disadvantage but to the advantage.

When asked about the possibility that women seafarers might cut short their sea careers due to their commitment to marriage and family life, these employers were reflective. They recognised that a desire to be at home with partner and family may indeed influence a woman's decision to leave the sea, however they saw that this equally, could be the case with male seafarers. The problem of retention was seen to be an industry-wide problem regardless of the gender of the seafarer. As two employers noted:

There are always those who think, [...] there is always this feeling you know at some point, that they [women] will get married or they'll want to stay at home. But it is easy to make that statement. Often times, I stop and ask myself is it [a gender issue?], there's a lot of men who I know who, like myself, decide I'm going to start a family and stop [going to sea].

If you look at the drop-out rate in loads of companies, it's not a lot of difference really if you take it over. And I've seen loads of guys drop out.

## **EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN SEAFARERS**

In order to fully understand the issues surrounding the employment of women seafarers it is necessary to talk, not just to employers, but also to women seafarers themselves. For this study, a total of 33 women working in the marine department participated in in-depth interviews, with a further nine women participating in focus group discussions. These women were of a range of nationalities and in ranks ranging from cadet to captain.

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Women's accounts highlighted a number of difficulties that they faced in their pursuit of career at sea. For some of the older women seafarers, these problems started early, with difficulties gaining places in maritime colleges. These barriers were less likely to be reported by women who had started their maritime careers more recently<sup>2</sup>, however some women report some sexism from staff at their training institution and both younger and older women reported difficulties in finding companies willing to let them sail on their vessels in order to complete their training. Once qualified many women felt that their opportunities for promotion were equal to that of men's, however several women had experience of applying to companies who rejected their applications on the grounds of their gender, or who applied unofficial 'ceilings' on the level to which women could be promoted. As one female engineer noted:

I think actually that half the time the company does not offer much. I heard one of the superiors from the company saying that no matter how good you are [as a woman], we are not willing to make you Chief Engineer.

Once onboard, whether as cadets or later as qualified officers, it was not unusual for women to experience difficulties with male colleagues, a small number of whom sometimes had difficulty accepting women in maritime positions. These prejudices tended to be manifested either overtly and occasionally in a hostile manner, or, less obviously, via men's belief that women could not perform the tasks of a seafarer and thus required a 'protective' almost 'paternal' attitude which also hampered their ability to do their jobs. As one woman put it:

There are two different types of guys. One type is expecting more because they say "Women can't work on board." And if you make one mistake they say, "Okay I knew it, I knew it. Now you see, she is not able." And there is the other type, if you make something absolutely normal, like with a hammer you put a nail in something, they say "Oh My God, great! You can do it. I knew it. Fantastic!" And this is also absolutely typical after a while, because the smallest things you're doing, they are so, "Oh my God. Yes.!"

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed recently some countries maritime training institutions have been actively encouraging female applicants (see Belcher et al., 2003).



It was commonplace for women to report that they had to work much harder, and perform much better than their male counterparts in order to be accepted and be seen as able to do their jobs. As the following quotes illustrate:

It's very normal, you have to try twice as hard to be proven just half as good when it comes to the guys.

Most of the problems is that people look at your size and see your gender and think, "Oh, you are female, you are so small size, I don't think you can do all these tough jobs." And then the time when I was assistant engineer, the guys said to work about eight hours a day and I work about 12-16 hours a day. To prove that I can work and that I can do better. So from then on nobody actually disturbed me that much with this. They know that when I work, I work very hard.

However, the majority of women told us that, with time, they were usually able to overcome such reservations become accepted, and even respected, by their male colleagues. As one woman noted:

After six months I had no problem, if anything I was respected even – you know I had men coming to me, asking me questions. You just have to work hard and establish yourself. Everything seems to follow after that. I never had a problem beyond that. Received nothing but compliments but once you get over that initial hurdle I think you're fine.

In addition to these problems of professional acceptance, many women also reported problems with some male colleagues that could broadly come under the term 'sexual harassment'. Sexual harassment is a serious and complicated issue (for a detailed discussion of workplace sexual harassment please see Stockdale, 1996 or Cleveland et al., 2000). For the purpose of this paper, it is perhaps useful if sexual harassment is considered in terms of the following statement:

‘[...] in organisations where people work together in clear occupational hierarchies and some individuals occupy positions of power and authority over others, there exists a potential for individuals to abuse their powers in the interests of their own sexual gratification, and to the detriment of their subordinates.’ (Belcher et al, 2003: 63)

The sexual harassment reported by the women seafarers we interviewed took many forms including sexual comments in the guise of ‘humour’, persistent sexual invitations and unwanted physical contact, as the following quotes illustrate:

The only thing is, I heard somebody telling me after I sign off from that ship, they told me that now there are a couple of holes in the toilet which I didn’t find out. I actually tried to check for holes, first when I joined the ship, but I didn’t find any so I didn’t know that there are holes there. So somebody told me there are peepholes and they peep at me when I was taking shower.

I woke up with a [crewmember] feeling me up and stuff. And I went to, I mean, I was asleep – I thought I was dreaming. I didn’t realise at first and then it got a bit more

Like some Masters also this thing – you come on board, after two days they give you a drink and say, “Okay, come let’s go to bed.”

In the rigidly hierarchical and isolated environment of the ship such behaviours could be particularly difficult for the women involved, as one woman noted:

You can’t escape from it. It’s like, if you’re at work, you get harassed, you come home, you forget about it. You’re on ship, you get harassed, you go to your cabin – you’ve got a phone in your cabin, they ring you constantly. They’re knocking at your door, they’re walking up and down the alleyway.

Women reported taking a number of steps to avoid such unwanted sexual attention and advances, such as avoiding social situations on board, locking their cabins at night or attempting to de-feminise their appearance. Where women did attempt to report these problems to the company, they were not always successful, as one woman recounted:

As soon as I saw my personnel manager I told him and he said I should expect that sort of thing because I was at sea and I should deal with it myself.

In the cruise sector, where some companies held high profile and visibly enforced policies on sexual harassment, experiences of sexual harassment were reported to be much less common. However for many women working in the cargo sector, such policies and the subsequent protection they offered frequently did not appear to be in place.

Despite the problems they sometimes faced, the women who were interviewed displayed considerable enthusiasm for their work at sea and an, often striking, dedication and determination to succeed in this sector, as one woman said:

it all boils down to determination. We were determined to do it and there was nothing which was going to stop us.

Many women were dedicated to a long career at sea (and indeed at the point of interview several women had had many years sea time and were in senior ranks). As one woman stated:

There's a set number of years, if you do well, you get the right report, you can reach captain, you can get there. I intend to be up there in that time.

Where women thought of leaving the sea, often their intentions were to utilise their skills and experiences in a career in the maritime industry ashore.

## **DISCUSSION**

Our data suggested that employers had a range of attitudes and experiences regarding women seafarers. These attitudes were often reflected in companies' informal recruitment policies which ranged from open 'equal opportunities' policies, with allowing women to be employed in any position or rank, through to unofficial policies of rejecting all applications from women seafarers, regardless of their rank, qualifications or experience. There was evidence that gendered stereotypes continued to persist within the industry, and these were most often expressed by those employers who had limited or no experience employing women as navigation or engineering officers. Those employers who had employed or worked alongside women seafarers frequently gave very positive accounts of women's seafaring skills, and several rated women's professional performance as equal to, and indeed often superior to, men's.

As noted above, those employers who held negative views of women working as seafarers typically had very limited or no experience employing women on their vessels. This is perhaps not surprising: if an employer in any industry holds a preconceived view that only male employees can effectively fulfil certain positions or perform certain tasks then, whilst there is an adequate supply of males to fill these positions, he or she is unlikely to employ females. It also appeared to be the case, with a small number of employers, that whilst during their careers they may have had a range of experience in terms of 'good' and 'bad' male seafarers, a single negative experience with only one or two women seafarers could effectively influence their view as to the suitability of all women as potential employees and thus these employers were effectively ignoring an important potential source of labour in the form of women employees.

Pertinent to the issue of women as a potential resource to address the current and predicted future shortage of qualified officers is the concern over possible differential retention rates between male and female seafarers. The perception of the primacy of the commitment to women and family has been cited to be highly significant in terms of women's marginalisation in the workplace (Spencer and Podmore, 1987). Our research, and that of other researchers, in fact suggests that separation from home and family is a significant source of stress to seafarers regardless of gender (see for

example Parker et al., 1997; Thomas 2003; Thomas et al 2003). Indeed, dissatisfaction with prolonged separations from home and family has been reported to be one of the most common reasons for (male) seafarers cutting short their sea career (Telegraph, 1999). There is no reliable data available relating to differential wastage rates of male and female seafarers. However, our data suggested that women remained at sea for significant periods and we found examples of women combining both marriage and motherhood with a very successful sea career. These findings are supported by other studies such as NUMAST's survey of its female union members which reported that 66% had over 6 years sea experience and nearly one in five (19%) 15 years or longer. Seventy one percent of the women responding to the questionnaire reported that they intended staying at sea to seek promotion to the highest levels (NUMAST, 2000). Our data suggests that the issue of retention is one that applies to both male and female seafarers and should be addressed by the industry as such.

Retention may be defined in terms of maintenance of a sea-going career, and more broadly in terms of retention within the maritime industry, whether at sea or ashore. The maritime industry has a continued need for qualified maritime officers with sea-going experience to fill positions in the industry ashore (OECD, 2003). Qualified women seafarers who have sufficient sea-time may be considered as a potential supply of labour to fill shore-side positions.

The women we interviewed were generally very positive about their experiences as seafarers and many were committed to a career in the maritime industry. However, a number of women spoke of problems they experienced gaining access to vessels for initial training and qualification, and, when qualified, some also spoke of rejection from companies based solely on their gender. Many women reported experiencing problems onboard that usually related to only a minority of their male colleagues, but could drastically influence their experience of a particular trip of contract. Such problems included hostility from male crew and reluctance to accept women as capable of undertaking the work of a seafarer, and incidences of sexual harassment ranging from verbal sexualised comments to physical assault. These factors need to be effectively addressed by companies in order to ensure the continued commitment

and retention of existing women seafarers and the recruitment of women seafarers in the future.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our data from both employers and women seafarers themselves suggested that women are a valuable source of labour for the industry that is currently being overlooked. A number of steps need to be taken to promote the participation of women in the industry and to ensure that conditions on board are such that, once qualified, women choose to continue their sea careers. These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the report of this study (see Belcher et al, 2003), however they can be summarised as follows:

- Dissemination of the positive experiences of companies employing women seafarers should be facilitated in order to address, and diminish gender stereotypes within the industry.
- Development and implementation of policies addressing sexual harassment should be undertaken by all companies regardless of whether they currently employ women seafarers (as successfully undertaken by companies within the cruise sector).
- Where possible, the placement of female crewmembers (and particularly female cadets) should occur on vessels where they are not the lone female onboard.
- Consideration should be given to policies relating to pregnancy and maternity benefits.
- Active promotion of seafaring as a potential career for female (as well as male) young people should be extended.

Taken together these steps would encourage the employment of more women seafarers and assist with retention rates of both women and men at sea. The industry would thus benefit from the talent and human resources represented by women willing to seek a career in the maritime industry, something many shore-side employers capitalised upon some time ago. In the course of our study for the ILO researchers were continually impressed with the calibre, guts and determination of the women they met. It seems an expensive loss to the industry that many companies are unable to see beyond stereotyped perceptions to the value represented by women in the modern world of work. Our evidence suggests that there are a number of exceptional women prepared to dedicate themselves to a maritime career. Perhaps it is time for employers to match their courage and consider changing their employment practices to take full advantage of the opportunity that they are currently missing.

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