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Citation for final published version:

Zhao, Minghua 2000. Women seafarers on cruiseships. *The Sea* (145) , p. 4.

Publishers page:

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## The SIRC column

# Women seafarers on cruiseships

THE growth in world trade and the consequent expansion of world shipping, taken together with the globalisation of the world seafarers' labour market in the 1980s and 1990s, have led to a rapid increase in women's shipboard employment in several specialised sectors.

In cruise shipping, women are increasingly employed on ships, at various levels with various ranks and responsibilities. By the late 1990s, women accounted for some 30 per cent of crew complements in the sector (compared with less than five per cent in the early 1980s). Women are recruited

employed in the deck and engine departments, 100 per cent of the women were serving in cabins or restaurants except one used as a cook and another as a tailor.

The same pattern is found in virtually all cruiseships where men are doing "men's work" and women are doing "women's work". Certainly, women are occasionally found in management; their number is very small and they are always women from developed countries. Women are also employed as entertainers, beauticians, nurses, aerobic leaders and receptionists and so on; these women, however,

women in this group do not intend to stay at sea unless they have the ambition to develop their careers in management, and see the possibility of doing so.

Women recruited from developing countries take jobs on cruiseships primarily out of financial need. Many are married with children. They need "high wages" to support their families, albeit the wages are only "high" in comparison with what they can earn in their own countries. Many have to pay manning agents a significant amount to be recruited, and they also have to bear the entire cost of training.

In the labour market, women face discrimination in terms of the maximum age limit set against their employment. In the Philippines, for example, the age ceiling for men to work on cruiseships is 40; for women it is 29. In addition, many of these women have to pay bond money to the agents or the cruise companies to ensure they meet the full requirement of their employers.

Aboard, the majority of these women are assigned the hardest work and are placed at the bottom of the ship hierarchy in positions such as cabin stewardesses, waitresses or cleaners. They are discriminated against in many aspects of their work and life aboard, such as assignment of tasks and allocation of accommodation, but most glaringly in wages.

For the same positions, women seafarers from developing countries receive much lower wages than women from developed countries. Despite this, these women intend to continue to work on cruiseships. This is because they have a clearly defined goal: to save enough money so that they can buy their own houses or set up their own land-based businesses.

Women certainly have made advances into the traditionally male maritime world. Indeed, the current situation – the rapid expansion of the fleet as well as the serious shortage of seafarers – makes the world maritime community turn its attention to women.

The millennium ushers in a new era, with plenty of job opportunities for women. However, to promote women's real integration into the world seafaring labour force, barriers blocking their access to employment opportunities and factors affecting their working and living conditions aboard, especially sexism and racism must be removed. As in other sectors of shipping, women seafarers on cruiseships clearly have to fight a long battle before they can achieve fair treatment and equality regardless of their gender or nationality.



**Dr Minghua Zhao**, researcher at the Seafarers International Research Centre, looks at how women seafarers have changed the traditional all-male crewing pattern on cruiseships

from all world regions but mainly from south east Asia and eastern Europe. The increase in women's participation in world cruise shipping has fundamentally changed the traditional male division of labour in the cruise sector.

Two major factors account for such a sea change: the overall growing demand of the industry, and company strategies to place more women on board vessels. According to cruise lines' claims, more women are recruited because companies want to provide women with equal employment opportunities and because companies want to balance the sex ratio aboard toward a "normal" social, working and living environment for (male) seafarers.

While the first intention is too subjective to be tested for its sincerity and the second intention is likely to be true, one thing is certain: according to company reports, cruise lines are happy with women, because they find "women seafarers are particularly popular with family holiday makers", and because "women certainly sell more wine as bar waitresses and bar attendees".

In cruise shipping, seafarers' status along the line of ship hierarchy is largely determined by their gender and nationality. All the captains in the sector are men and no woman is found in the deck or engine departments. Women are concentrated in hotel, catering and other "non-technical" or "non-professional" sectors.

For example, in mid June 1999, when M/S Switzerland was calling at the port of Amsterdam, the vessel carried 113 Ukrainian seafarers, of whom 68 were men and 46 were women. While 70 per cent of these men were em-

tend to be recruited from western Europe or North America. A handful of Filipino women are sometimes found serving at ships' reception "because of their good English". Those women serving in cabins, restaurants, bars or utility rooms as stewardesses, waitresses and cleaners are most likely from south east Asia and eastern Europe.

Nationality is therefore another main factor determining seafarers' position aboard. Women employed from developed and developing countries have striking differences in motivation, employment history, recruitment and training, employment experiences aboard and future prospects.

The former decide to go to sea "to see the world" and "to get to know people from other cultures". Most of these women are single and have employment histories with high-profile restaurants or hotels before joining the ship. Non-English-speaking women tend to have experience of learning the language in big cities like London or New York. Women in this category chiefly rely on advertising by manning agents or cruise companies for information about job opportunities. When agents are involved, women pay them for the information provided and not for the jobs the information generates.

In most cases, these women are offered a contract for three to six months. Permanent positions are not available unless they are in managerial roles. Most of these women are placed in areas where they have direct contact with passengers. They find the work very hard, but seldom complain because most only intend to stay at sea for one or two years. Most