

Gender imbalance in the maritime industry: impediments, initiatives and recommendations

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ABSTRACT

The reality of a global gender imbalance in the workforce is undeniable. However, it is even more profound in the traditionally male-dominated maritime industry, where women make up a mere 2% of the workforce. Although the maritime industry has adopted initiatives towards closing the existing gender gap, the integration of women into the maritime industry has been at a sluggish rate due to various impediments. This paper not only traces the issue of the gender imbalance to its historical roots but also highlights the current impediments and challenges unique to the maritime industry towards achieving gender equality in its workforce. Using a review of literature, this paper also brings forward the various initiatives put in place to facilitate the integration of women into the maritime sector and suggests recommendations for the same. The paper acknowledges that women are a growing force and the need to close the gender gap is widely accepted. However, even though many initiatives have led to an increase of female presence, there is room for further efforts.

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Introduction

The existence of a current worldwide gender gap is indisputable. The World Economic Forum (an independent non-profit organisation) based in Geneva that engages the foremost political, business and other leaders of society to shape global, regional and industry agendas worldwide released the Global Gender Gap Report in 2015 which ranked 145 participating countries using data from a 10-year period. The report revealed that none of the participants had successfully closed the gender gap (World Economic Forum 2015). Even the most socially liberal and proactive nations such as the Nordic countries who are ranked at the top of the global gender index fell short in some of the four measured pillars of: economic participation and opportunity, education attainment, health and survival and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2015). This issue of gender imbalance is even more profound in the maritime industry.

In the maritime industry, as little as 2% of the workforce is believed to be made up of women, with the majority of these roles being on cruise ships and ferries – usually the least protected and the lowest paid of seafaring jobs (International Transport Workers'

Federation 2016). *Lloyd's List*, a trusted media source in the world of shipping, released the '100 Top Influential People in the Shipping Industry' in 2015. A mere five women received a mention on the list (*Lloyd's List* 2015), highlighting the disparities that exist between women and their male counterparts in the industry. In comparison, Australian women make up 46% of the general workforce and account for nearly 12% of the construction industry and 15% of the mining industry (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013); and in the United States, female physicians have increased from 12% in 1980 (American Medical Association 2011) to 32% in 2014 (Young et al. 2015).

This paper begins by tracing the historical roots of the beginning of the issue of gender imbalance in the maritime industry. It continues to establish the need to achieve gender equality and highlights the current impediments which is preventing the industry from doing so. The paper then brings forward the important initiatives that are shaping the future of the women workforce in the maritime industry and suggests recommendations for the same.

A history of gender imbalance in the maritime industry

It is not surprising that there is a gender imbalance in the maritime industry. Traditionally, the maritime sector was a 'boy's only club' fuelled by the widely documented superstition that it was bad luck to have women on board ships at sea (Volo and Volo 2002). Often the only women found at sea were figureheads protruding from the bows of the ships (de Pauw 1998). This folklore was deeply rooted and not limited to the lower class and uneducated sailors. In 1808, British Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood wrote 'I never knew a woman brought the sea in a ship that some mischief did not befall the vessel'. (Hughes 1957). These legends, customs and superstitions were often used to explain mysterious weather phenomena, and sailors would grasp at any belief that may ensure their safe passage during their unpredictable and perilous pursuits (Volo and Volo 2002). The superstition that it is bad luck to have women on board ships greatly decreased the seafaring opportunities for women over the centuries.

Regardless of commercial seagoing careers being completely closed to women before the 1900s (National Park Service 2016), women maintained a maritime presence in other ways. In the eighteenth century, a merchant captain's wife or daughter may have joined his vessel, often becoming valuable (yet unofficial) members of the crew by learning the art of navigation or providing assistance during emergencies (National Park Service 2016). By the eighteenth century, it was also common place, despite written regulations, to find the wives of British navy officers aboard ships (Volo and Volo 2002), sometimes including battleships (The Mariners' Museum 2000). Some intrepid and adventuresome women found themselves overwhelmed by the lure of the sea, and, without the fortuity of being related to an officer, joined vessels disguised as male sailors (National Park Service 2016). One such woman, Hannah Snell went through great lengths to keep her true identity hidden throughout her seven-year seafaring career as young sailor 'James Gray', including keeping an abdominal gunshot wound secret so that her sex could not be identified for fear of retribution (de Pauw 1998).

In the past, women have sometimes played valuable roles in supporting sectors to the maritime industry. For example, some women performed the role of lighthouse keeper which as demanding, and often involved intense physical labour such as rescue operations

at sea. The role was traditionally given to men as women were considered incapable of such tasks (Bromwell 2008). However, irrespective of the tradition and when given an opportunity, women performed their duties successfully, often without acknowledgment or remuneration (Clifford and Clifford 2001). The first female lighthouse keepers date back to 1190 when a group of Irish nuns looked after a lighthouse at Youghal until 1842, using torches to guide the vessels (Bromwell 2008). The first official American female lighthouse keeper was Hannah Thomas, taking over the responsibility, as many did, after the death of her husband in 1776 (Bromwell 2008). Ida Lewis of Lime Rock Lighthouse in Rhode Island manned the lighthouse for 39 years and is believed to have saved 18 people from drowning (The Mariners' Museum 2000).

During the industrial boom brought on by both world wars, many women took on jobs that were traditionally held by men. As the demand for ships sky-rocketed, women took on many shipbuilding roles such as crane operators, welders, riveters, fitters and joiners (The Mariners' Museum 2000). These labour-intensive ship building roles were previously thought unmanageable by women (Braybon and Summerfield 2013) but in mid-1943 at the height of the shipbuilding boom, nearly 65% of the shipyard workers on the West Coast of America were women (National Park Service 2016). At the end of the war(s), it was considered national duty to return these positions to the men who returned from service, leaving the women to return to their traditional lower paid jobs where their newly acquired technical skills and training was often wasted (National Park Service 2016).

At sea, women began serving as nurses on navy ships as early as 1811 (The Mariners' Museum 2000). It was not until 1942 that, with a shortage of men due to the war, the Secretary of the Navy and the Office of Naval Intelligence opened their doors to women, who were then trained and later sworn in as ensigns in the United States Navy (the lowest level of commissioned naval officer) (The Mariners' Museum 2000). In 1976, the United States Naval Academy opened its doors to the first class of women midshipmen seeing the first 55 female graduates in 1980 (United States Naval Academy 2016). In 1935 the first female commercial captain, Captain Anna Schetinina was accredited in Russia (Aggrey 2000) but it has only been within the last 50 years that women have truly begun to enter the extensive realm of the male-dominated business (Orsel 2015). Due to the ever increasing networks such as the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA) and initiatives such as the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) program on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector (IWMS), the presence of women in the industry is a growing phenomenon.

However, the maritime industry requires further initiative and efforts to close the gender gap.

The need for gender equality in the maritime industry

Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but necessary to achieve the most favourable socio-economic outcomes (UN Women 2016). For example, according to Australian Human Rights Commission (2013), with equal representation of women in traditionally male-dominated industries, Australia's GDP could be boosted by 11%. Investing in women has been shown to increase social welfare and human development. For example, according to European Institute for Gender Equality (2014), tangible benefits of gender equality will include better education, career growth, financial independence

and new roles in society. Modern times have generally accepted that society as a whole benefits from the full and active participation of the entire population. By ensuring equal participation of the population, businesses are more likely to successfully recruit the most capable and skilful employees by selecting from a larger, broader and more diverse talent pool (Australian Human Rights Commission 2013), and this is what the maritime industry needs.

As stated by the World Maritime University (WMU) President Dr Björn Kjerfve, 'an industry that carries 90 percent of the world's goods needs at least 90 percent of the world's talent ... and gender is irrelevant' (WMU 2014a). The promotion of equal employment opportunities, including in leadership roles, will ensure that the best possible candidate gets the job. Moreover, highly specialised and technical industries such as port operations in the shipping industry are experiencing skills shortage, which is forecasted to increase in the future (Flint 2012). The maritime industry needs to recruit more qualified candidates. Equal education and employment opportunities need not only to be made available for all members of society, but need to be marketed and made attractive to under-represented societal groups, thus sustaining the industry's needs. In the big picture, equal gender representation is required to secure the current and future health and success of the maritime sector (Mitropoulos 2008). Unfortunately changing entrenched societal norms around gender stereotypes is a slow and challenging process.

Impediments for the integration of women in the maritime industry

Women face many challenges if they choose to work in the maritime industry today. Common reported issues include many physical, social and economic aspects (Women At The Helm 2013) that impact the resulting working environment and how the women perceive it. Challenges manifest in many forms and can be so great as to affect the successful retention of women in their ideal careers, with many quitting jobs after a few years (Dragomir and Surugiu 2013).

While harassment of any kind is harmful, sexual harassment and abuse are widespread and present a major challenge for women in the maritime industry. Many women report common occurrences including sexual comments in the guise of humour, persistent sexual invitations and unwanted physical contact (Thomas 2004). Unfortunately, in some cases harassment has gone to extremes. The unsolved case of a South African cadet whose body was found floating in the ocean a few days after allegations that she was being repeatedly raped by a senior officer on board highlights the intimidating and deplorable situations that female seafarers may find themselves in (Women's History Network 2011).

Furthermore to widespread sexual harassment, there are other forms of discrimination experienced by women in the maritime industry. For example, education is a large concern when discussing the global gender gap. In some developing countries girls are not even given early childhood education (Aggrey 2000). Where women have been given the right to education, some countries still do not allow them to enrol in male-dominated arenas such as maritime educational institutions (ITF Seafarers 2016). Forecasts show an increasing officer shortage of 146,500 by 2025 (BIMCO and ICS 2015) and to avoid this, a significant increase in training levels must be realised. An obvious aide to rectify the shortage is

to not limit the pool of potential candidates by gender, race or any other discriminating factor.

For women who are successful in completing the required training to become a seafarer, they may find difficulty in being hired or, once hired, are met with further challenges once joining a crew. Women often adopt coping mechanisms including changes to their behaviour, how they dress or when they socialise when working with all male crews in order to alleviate gender stereotypes and to 'fit in' (Kitada 2013). The continual rise in equal opportunity policies and education on gender equality within companies will aid in alleviating the need for women to mask their feminine side.

Compared to other traditionally male-dominated industries, the maritime sector faces a unique hurdle. Although the maritime industry is responsible for the worldwide trade of nearly 90% of all goods (George 2013), there is no tangible relation with the end consumer. Thus, the general public have limited understanding and awareness of the commercial shipping industry and the employment opportunities that it presents. Somehow, this global industry transporting more than 4 trillion US dollars' worth of goods each year (Global Insight 2009) is flying under the radar. This, of course does not help the case for gender equality. The less 'outsiders' are aware of the maritime sector and the opportunities that it presents for job-seekers, the more likely it will remain the mysterious 'boys club' that it traditionally is.

Having a lack of amenities is also a common problem for women seafarers. Issues with obtaining suitably designed and adequately sized personal protective equipment, including correctly fitting safety boots, safety gloves and overalls have been reported (Turnbull 2013). Additionally, there is often a shortage in the provision of other amenities on board such as sanitary items, contraceptives, access to confidential medical advice and reliable communication lines/internet for seafarers. Further improvements to the rights of women workers such as ensuring adequate and unprejudiced maternity benefits must be addressed in order to effectively battle the gender gap in the maritime industry.

Initiatives to promote gender equality in the maritime industry

Influence from worldwide initiatives

The first documented feminist publication was written in 1792 by British writer Mary Wollstonecraft (Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia 2014), thus starting a long and still ongoing battle for gender equality. The Women's Rights Movement in the United States commenced in 1848 when women were granted citizenship, and continued for the next 150 years (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter 1998). In 1893, New Zealand became the first permanent and independent country to give women the right to vote, and nine years later Australia followed suit (World Atlas 2016), though further discrimination based on race, religion or social standing continued to veto women from this right (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter 1998).

Women in Development (WID) was a term coined by a Washington-based network of female development professionals in the 1970s (Tinker 1990). WID is associated with activities concerning the development of women with an effort to gain equity and economic efficiency by integrating women into global economies (Razavi and Miller 1995). The term continues to be used today in the assessment of sustainable development of

women around the world by important stakeholders such as in the United Nations (UN)' *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014* (UN Women 2016). Following the resurgence of the feminist movement fuelled by discussions surrounding WID in the 1970s (Razavi and Miller 1995), the first World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico City was held in 1975. Subsequently, the UN declared 1976–1985 as the Decade for Women, in an effort to promote and encourage WID (UN Women 2016). Throughout this decade new legislation was formed to promote women's rights such as the comprehensive effort on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979, which included recognition for women's right to receive training and education (Razavi and Miller 1995). Unfortunately, some gender equality issues raised over the decade such as the sexual division of labour were given no more than cursory attention due to the hostility they raised with international and national development experts at the time (Razavi and Miller 1995). The end of the decade did not stop international progress on the gender imbalance. After two weeks of political debate at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were established, the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights (UN Women 2015). The third item on the declaration reads 'Determined to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity' (United Nations 1995).

The UN, now 193 members strong, has placed significant attention on the issue of gender equity. In response to the recognition of inadequate funding and the lack of a single recognised entity to direct efforts being made, the UN's General Assembly created 'UN Women' in 2010 to accelerate the achievement of gender equality goals and the empowerment of women (UN Women 2016). UN Women has since been a major global force by supporting international political negotiations on the standards for gender equality and by providing expertise and funding to help UN member states implement those standards (UN Women 2016). In 2015, women were allowed to cast ballots for the first time ever in a Saudi Arabian election (Aldosari 2015), leaving Vatican City as the only country left to catch up on this momentous milestone in the fight for gender equity (Gorney 2015).

The effort to promote gender equity worldwide had a significant impact on the maritime industry as well. Since 1919, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) a UN agency with 187 member states has worked to set labour standards, create policies and develop programs promoting decent work for all humans (ILO 2016). The ILO's focus on increasing women in the maritime industry is indisputable as a result of the publication 'Promoting the Employment of Women in the Transport Sector – Obstacles and Policy Options' which covers issues such as the attraction, retention and re-entry of women in the sector in detail (Turnbull 2013). Further international efforts include the Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW 95), revisited in 1995 and including the adoption of resolution 14; 'promotion of the participation of women in the maritime industry'.

Providing opportunity for equal education

Access to fair and equal education has been a major hurdle for women entering the maritime industry. Since 1988, the IMO, the UN's agency for the maritime sector, has been

directly addressing the gender gap with the development of the Strategy on the IWMS (IMO 2016). At a time when few maritime training facilities allowed female students, the IWMS's primary objective was to encourage these institutions to open their doors to women, enabling equal opportunity for women and men to acquire the high-level skills required in the maritime industry (IMO 2016). In 2012, the IWMS adopted the new title MDG3: Strengthening Maritime Resource Development (MDG3/RD) signalling the conclusion of the pivotal development phase of the Organisation's gender strategy, and a new, up-to-date capacity-building program with focus on the advancement of women in maritime activities (IMO Technical Co-operation Committee 2013). The underlying motivation for the updated MDG3/RD program was to support the achievement of one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals set in year 2000 to be attained by 2015; *Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women* (United Nations 2015). The report released by the UN following the end of the 15-year time frame indicates positive results including: the reduction of gender disparity in education and the decline in the proportion of women in vulnerable employment (United Nations 2015), both of which are issues concerning the maritime industry.

Education is high on the agenda for international bodies interested in closing the gender gap. Established under the auspices of the IMO, the International Maritime Law Institute in Malta reserves 50% of places in the Masters of Laws program for female candidates (IMLI 2016). Another major player in international maritime education, the WMU, established its Women's Association (WMUWA) with a purpose to connect, educate, inspire and promote female maritime professionals (WMU 2014b). The WMU's Acting President at the time, Neil Bellefontaine, recognised the initiative as well overdue (WMU 2014b). Nevertheless, through a targeted recruitment strategy in conjunction with strong support from fellowship donors, the University is finding success in enticing women through its doors; the intake of females into the Masters of Science program has risen from 2% in the early 1980s to a record breaking 37% in 2016 (WMU 2016).

Getting women through the doors of maritime institutions is only part of the solution. Following a document analysis of eight maritime universities throughout Finland, Norway, Sweden and the Philippines (all ranked in the top seven in the global gender gap index, World Economic Forum 2015), it was shown that the issue of gender equality is not explicitly mentioned in any program curriculum (Cars and Österman 2015). Due to a lack of comparable information, the degree that inclusion of gender awareness would have on the retention of women in the program, and further down the line in their careers is unknown. Understanding that the topic could raise resistance from female and male students who find gender discourse unnecessary, uncomfortable or possibly even ridiculous (Cars and Österman 2015) is an important challenge not to be overlooked. In a study on female seafarers in 2013, it was shown that many women adopt strategies to 'fit-in' to their male-dominated environments which can vary throughout a career and whether the woman is in seagoing or shore-based employment (Kitada 2013). These strategies may underline the conflict between gender equity awareness training and the desire to blend in and 'be one of the boys'. Although, the addition of gender issues into maritime institutions' curriculum alone will not close the gender gap, addressing them on an individual, structural and symbolic level with a gender-conscious approach will help the long-term development and competitiveness of the industry and our society as a whole (Cars and Österman 2015).

Conferences for the promotion of women recruitment

In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo helped forge a path for gender equity by putting issues such as family planning, reproductive and sexual health care and women's empowerment in the limelight, therefore underlining women's critical importance to social and economic progress (Mitropoulos 2008). And the maritime industry was listening. The number of regional, national and international conferences concerning women in the maritime industry continues to grow and contributes to closing the gender gap in the maritime industry. The *Conference on the Development of a Global Strategy for Women Seafarers* held in Korea in 2013 saw the release of the IMO's film 'Women at the Helm' which showcases the IMO's efforts at promoting positive outcomes for women in shipping and highlights first-hand experiences from those who have already found success (Women At The Helm 2013). Also in 2013, the *International Conference on Proudly Empowering Women in the Maritime* was held in Barcelona. The WMU's second maritime women-focused conference held in Malmö in 2014 saw the release of the book *Maritime Women: Global Leadership*, showcasing the event's supporting contributions.

In 2016, the *Regional Conference for Pacific Women in Maritime* was held in Tonga and the first *Conference of the Women in Maritime Association, Caribbean (WIMAC)* was held in Grand Cayman. In 2017, California Maritime Academy will host the sixth *Annual Women in Maritime Leadership Conference*. All of these conferences are breaking down barriers for women in the industry around the world. While the gender imbalance persists, it is expected that so will the trend in women-focused maritime conferences.

Forming trade unions and associations

The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) is an independent international trade organisation comprised of roughly 700 unions, and representing nearly 4.8 million transport workers from 147 countries. The ITF encourages and organises network solidarity and promotes human rights, social justice and economic progress worldwide. Amongst the issues that the ITF is tackling, the reduction of gender stereotypes within the maritime industry is a high priority. The ITF's women's committee is working to increase the number of women transport workers, maximise their power and to win better conditions for women workers around the world (ITF Seafarers 2016). The ITF recognises that 35% of women experience gender-based violence at work and have raised awareness and demanded progress on the issue through the campaign to end violence against women (ITF Seafarers 2016).

The WISTA, founded in 1975, is a major player in the fair and equal representation of women in the maritime industry. The organisation focuses on networking, education and mentoring, and has over 2100 members in 35 countries, providing a worldwide support network for women in the sector (WISTA 2016). WISTA takes an active role including conducting meetings, hosting forums and award summits, as well as their long-running annual international conference (the inaugural event was held in Germany in 1981) (WISTA 2016). The current development of a Mentorship Program is underway at WISTA as an invaluable resource to encourage, guide and support young women who are interested in a career in the maritime industry (WISTA 2016).

Many other regional associations are working to provide support and give a voice to women in the maritime industry around the globe. The Women in Maritime Associations cover many regions; Asia (WIMA-Asia), Philippines (WIMAPHIL), Pacific (PacWIMA), Papua New Guinea (PNGWIMA) and Caribbean (WIMAC). Together with the Arab International Women's Maritime Forum for Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Association for Women in Maritime, East and Southern Africa (WOMESA), the network of associations available to women seafarers is expansive.

Establishing mentoring initiatives

The value of mentorship has been widely accepted across many industries worldwide. In 1995, research showed that informal learning averages about 70% of learning needs (the remaining 30% stemming from formal learning) (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 1995). Mentoring is an effective and personal form of informal learning that is valued by the maritime community (Goldberg 2016). In addition to the initiatives by WISTA mentioned above, the Maritime Mentoring Community has developed a free and voluntary website where potential mentors can connect with protégés seeking career building relationships. Though finding mentors and keeping in contact within the transient maritime community can be difficult, the website is also promoting e-mentoring which allows the connection to be online rather than over a face-to-face meeting (Goldberg 2016).

Ending sexual discrimination

It has been decades since formal legislation has recognised and put in strategies to eradicate sexual discrimination. In Australia, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 clearly outlawed sexual harassment, though it remains a stubborn issue in the maritime industry today. Maritime unions have enacted policies that protect against sexual harassment in the maritime industry. One of the four fundamental principles of the ILO is the elimination of discrimination in respect to employment and occupation and the ILO mainstreams gender equality into all aspects of its work (ILO 2016). The International Transport Federation's (ITF) *Guidance on Eliminating Shipboard Harassment and Bullying* recognises the widespread effect that harassment and bullying, including in a sexual manner, can have on the physical and emotional health of workers as well as the ensuing economic and potential legal consequences that it may have on maritime businesses (ICS and ITF 2016). The report provides guidance on creating and adopting company policies on harassment and bullying such as how to effectively manage reporting as well as measures to take to eliminate such harassment. Further initiatives such as sensitisation seminars have been promoted by the IMO as a productive means of enhancing the visibility and impact of women in the maritime sector (IMO Technical Co-operation Committee 2013).

Recruiting women in leadership roles

As modern day managerial styles adopt a less hierarchal and a more inclusive approach to leadership (Cable 2012), the opportunity to make use of participative leadership could help increase women's rise to leadership roles in the maritime industry. A participative leadership style is one that involves other people in process and decision-making rather than

taking an autocratic and authoritative approach (Özdemir and Albayrak 2015). With consideration to all leadership styles, participative leadership seems to be more suited to women working in male-dominated roles such as in the maritime sector (Özdemir and Albayrak 2015), not to say that they cannot adopt other leadership styles as required. The results from introducing and promoting the use of participative leadership styles in shipping companies could benefit organisational success and integrate more women into top positions (Özdemir and Albayrak 2015).

Recommendations

With consideration to the issue of the long-running history of gender inequality in the maritime industry as well as the strategies that are already in place to achieve the desired outcome of gender equity, the following are recommended:

1. Ensure consistent and ongoing education, training and sensitisation workshops in maritime sector businesses to enhance the visibility and impact of women in the maritime industry.
2. Add the topic of gender equity into maritime educational institutions' curriculums worldwide, using a systematic and gender-sensitive approach to increase awareness and promote equality amongst next generation maritime professionals.
3. Conduct further research/studies by international organisations to identify up-to-date statistical information on women in the maritime industry, identifying possible areas of focus such as role imbalances, pay imbalances, employment trends and other relative facts.
4. Develop zero-tolerance sexual harassment and discrimination policies that are blanket across the industry and are a mandatory for staff inductions. Also clear and confidential reporting processes should be made available to all employees.
5. Enforce the right for women to have access to medical, sexual health, contraceptives and sanitary items on board all seagoing vessels.
6. Demystify the industry by way of marketing campaigns to recruit more young women into the potentially rewarding career and to reduce the possibility of skills shortages in the future.
7. Partnership between individual institutions and industry associations/organisations to provide long-term career coaching, networking and fellowship opportunities to increase retention of women in the industry.
8. Develop further mentoring opportunities within maritime institutions and across organisations.
9. Set industry targets for increasing female membership in transport unions as to give a fair and equal voice to women and facilitate the higher prioritisation of issues that are relevant to them.
10. Create short- and long-term goals as well as methods to continually monitor and measure the progress of the integration of women into the maritime sector, providing insight into the health of the industry and to encourage further development of strategies as required.

Conclusion

A society that presents equal opportunities to all its members is one that fuels social and economic productivity and benefits the global community. However, there has been a long history of gender imbalance where men have been in a position of dominance and women have been perceived to be incapable of performing in traditionally male-oriented jobs. Regrettably, one such industry that suffers from a stubborn gender imbalance is the maritime industry. In attracting more women in the maritime sector, the industry faces impediments that include social, physical and economic issues such as lack of education, gender stereotypes, isolation, sexual harassment, discrimination, unequal employment opportunities, lack of amenities and support networks and the general mystery surrounding the sector.

However, the maritime industry recognises that the 'add women and stir' method is not ideal nor sufficient for the long-lasting integration of women into the sector. The past decades have seen a plethora of initiatives to empower and facilitate the integration of women into the maritime sector including the promotion of equal opportunity education, treaties and conventions, trade unions and associations, company policies and a growing list of conferences. Due to these extensive efforts, the maritime industry is seeing a rise in the number of female participants including in leadership roles. With sustained momentum behind these efforts, as well as access to steady industry resources and the ongoing development of support networks, the deeply rooted issue of gender imbalance that is a reality of the maritime industry will continue to fade.

Education is the main step in advocating the integration of women into international maritime activities. In addition to ensuring equal opportunity for education across all nations, educators and pupils alike must have the courage to discuss challenging topics such as engrained power imbalances and gender stereotypes. Differences between women and men should be celebrated as talents and not as challenges. Having the issue of gender equity (as well as equity amongst all minorities) being addressed in curriculums in maritime institutions can sensitise and educate the future workforce ensuring healthier peer-to-peer relationships, non-discriminatory opportunities and therefore stronger and more successful businesses.

In addition to education, integrated support networks are paramount for the successful recruitment, retention and re-entry of women into the maritime industry. These networks act on all levels, not only supporting the advancement of women in the industry but creating a stronger voice for women, taking part in the battle for women's rights, providing a safe refuge for consult on specific issues, and promoting the industry as a safe, rewarding and desirable career choice for women. All women should have access to such support and so far initiatives such as WISTA have proven their value by providing international networks that reach all women in all corners of the globe.

The truly globalised maritime industry requires consistent international efforts to realise gender equality. Massive ongoing efforts from powerful international agencies such as the IMO underline the desire for closing the gender gap. It may not be in this decade or the next that gender balance is achieved, but in line with the progress that has been actualised by society in general, the maritime industry will see a continual increase in women in the sector, to the benefit of all stakeholders.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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