

Seafarer Women - Perception of the Seafaring Career

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Abstract: Seafarer women represent a very small percentage of the world's maritime workforce. In the conditions of an expected shortage of seafarers, women represent an untapped human resource in seafaring that has to be attracted to join the maritime sector. This paper includes a study that presents the perception of women regarding their main motivation and factors of influence for choosing a maritime career, the most likely to happen problems in their career offshore and motives of quitting this job.

Key-Words: women seafarer, seafaring, maritime transport, human resources, navigation, female navigator, career, navigation, employment

1 Statistics on Seafarer Women

Nowadays, the problem of equal chances in the maritime field represents a challenge for obtaining human progress, respect and recognition of human rights. In a specific area like the maritime one, the gender equality has always been an issue due to the differences that exist among enrolments per gender at maritime engineering universities. Women had for years the false impression that the maritime business is forbidden for them. Men were the ones conducting this business and they've never allowed women's access as this would have looked like an intrusion in a sector that for centuries has been exclusively under men's control. Many developed countries still restrain women's access to the maritime business. There may also be some cultural resistance to women working outside the home, but the principal objections to employing women at sea appear to centre on lack of adequate separate facilities for women on board and stringent physical requirements [1].

Accordingly, Seafarers' Rights International Centre for advancing the legal protection of seafarers approximates that 1.5 million seafarers daily serve on a worldwide fleet of over 100,000 ships that transport over 90% of world trade [2] while International Labour Organisation (ILO) considers that more than 1.2 million seafarers operate ships [3].

In this figures, seafarer women represent a very small percentage. Current statistics of International

Transport Workers' Federation show that women make up only an estimated 2% of the world's maritime workforce [4].

According to ILO, in the cruise line sector, women represent 17-18% of the workforce. Ninety-four per cent of women are employed on passenger ships (with 68% on ferries and 26% on cruise ships) and 6% are employed on cargo vessels (i.e., container ships, oil tankers, etc.). As for jobs, there are women shipmasters and chief engineers, as well as other officers. However, generally, women are working as hotel staff on passenger ships. Of this latter group, 51.2% of women at sea come from OECD countries, 23.6% from Eastern Europe, 9.8% from Latin America and Africa, 13.7% from the Far East, and 1.7% from south Asia and the Middle East [5].

According to BIMCO and International Shipping Federation (ISF) 2010 study of the worldwide supply and demand for seafarers, the current worldwide demand for seafarers is 637,000 officers and 747,000 ratings that represent an overall shortage of officers of about 2%. Shortages are more acute in specialised sectors such as tankers and offshore support vessels and there is an underlying concern about the current and future availability of senior officers. Unless measures are taken to ensure a continued rapid growth in qualified seafarer numbers, especially for officers, existing shortages are likely to intensify over the next decade [6].

Women employment as seafarer can resolve such problems. Today, in the digitalized and automated world, where physical labour is mostly taken over by machines, on board ship an engineer woman can work as better as a man. We can say even better, if we take into account the fact that in the case of Constanta Maritime University, since 1995 when began to be accepted female as students, the graduating class leaders were mostly female, both in navigation, mechanical engineering or electrical engineering.

Another advantage of women seafarer's presence onboard ship is that it creates a more normal social environment. This is particularly important because the nature of seafaring life has changed in recent years and there is less time to go ashore and there are less people on board. Having women as part of the crew can reduce the sense of isolation felt by many seafarers [4].

Organisations like International Maritime Organisation, International Labour Organisation, International Transport Workers Federation and other specific institutions develop initiatives of women integration in the maritime sector and training opportunities to match the specific needs and requirements of women [7].

2 Women's Experiences as Seafarers

Very few women serve on cargo vessels. A relatively larger number serve on passenger vessels where they are mostly in the passenger service categories. In general, women serve on those cargo vessels which have high standards. Vessels with poor conditions of work usually do not have women working on board. Seafarers International Research Centre's study on women seafarers employed on cargo ships in the EC fleet in 1998 [8] found that women feel constantly watched and compelled by their male shipmates to work to the limits of their endurance. Women seafarers feel that they are always pressured to prove their ability by having to work harder or by taking on the more demanding tasks.

Doubtless, men also have to "prove themselves" when newly aboard ship. But the test they go through is shorter and much easier than for women. While most men report that it takes them "a few hours" to be accepted by their ship mates, it typically takes "a few days" for women to be able to interact with their male colleagues on relatively easier terms [9]. In some countries, maritime education and training institutions are not allowed to

recruit women to nautical courses. Some ship owners won't employ women. In other cases, owners pay even though women are doing equivalent work to that of male colleagues. Women may also be denied the facilities or equipment available to male workers [10].

Women working in a predominantly male, and often hostile, environment have to confront discrimination, sexual harassment, bullying and violence in their workplace on board ship [11].

According to a study made by Magramo and Eler in 2007 on seafarer women in Phillipines, companies hiring these women are actually preparing them for office positions. Women are more organized and are more appropriate to work in the office after they have acquired the necessary training and knowledge of running a ship. Seafarer women must be physically, emotionally and spiritually tough in order to overcome all kinds of obstacles and challenges that may come in this male-dominated profession [12].

Women seafarers work mainly in the cruise and ferries sector, often for Flags of Convenience vessels. These are among the worst paid and least protected of jobs at sea [13].

3 Perception of Women regarding a Seafarer Career

The following study was carried in May 2012, in Constanta Maritime University with the scope of identifying the perception of women regarding seafaring.

The study was based on the analysis of 21 questionnaires designed to target female students and graduates from the following two specializations: navigation and economic engineering in transports. A number of 11,66% persons were questioned from total of 180 women students at navigation and economic engineering at that date. The study sought, through the designated target groups, to meet the requirement of representativeness in the statistical sense of the term of the total number of female students enrolled in a university with marine profile from Romania. The decision to choose the targeted group for carrying out investigations was based on a series of statistical rules to obtain results with a reasonable margin of error and an acceptable risk.

The multiple choice questionnaires included questions regarding location, age and maritime studies of the interviewed persons, family tradition in the maritime profession, parents view on the seafarer profession, reasons for choosing maritime

profession, problems likely to meet for a woman in the seafaring career, perception of the difficulty in finding such a job and the motivation to quit the seafarer profession. A questioned person could choose more than one answers at a question.

Geographical representativeness of respondents was heterogeneous. Almost half the people who responded to the interview were from Constanta county and half from other counties from Romania. There were no foreign female students enrolled in the university at that date.

Most of the respondents (95.23%) were aged between 20 and 25 years.

A percentage of 52.38 of respondents had relatives working in the maritime field. There is a higher proportion of people whose father was working in maritime field (9.52%) than mother (4.76%).

The largest per cent of questioned women's parents showed encouragement for choosing a seafarer job or a job in the maritime field (66,66%). An interesting statistic is given by the significant proportion of parents who have an indifferent attitude or intention towards approving or disapproving the work at sea (14.28%), which means that the person interviewed had an own motivation to enrol in a maritime university, without being guided by family.

We have the intention to deepen in the future this research with other qualitative techniques such as focus groups, in-depth interviews or open questionnaires.

4 Results

The highest percentage of questioned women believed that the main motivation for choosing jobs in shipping is the income (52.38%). Indeed, the offshore wage is more than attractive compared to the Romanian onshore remuneration. For example, in May 2013 the Romanian on-shore wage was of 172.83 euro [14] and the minimum basic wage established for 1 January 2013 by the International Labour Organization was the equivalent of 441.11 euro [14]. Wages for senior seafaring positions and managerial functions are exponentially increased.

The second motivation to join seafaring is the prospect of career advancement in marine profession (38.09%). Family encouragement or the intention to continue the tradition represent less important factors of influence and are placed last.

Most women (57.14%) believe they are discriminated against men and are not regarded as good workers from an equal perspective. Sexual harassment (47.61%) is the second issue most likely

to happen, followed by difficulties in operating mechanical equipment (23.80%), feeling of isolation (14.28%), accident risks (14.28%), fatigue (9.52%) and increased workload (4.76%).

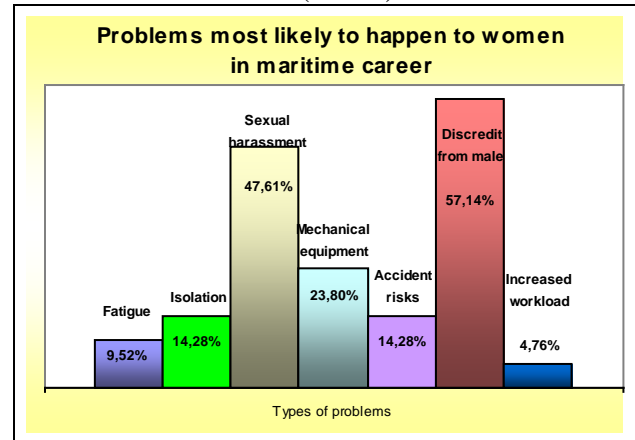


Fig.1. Types of problems most likely to happen to women in a maritime career

The highest percentage of respondents (90.47%) believes it's difficult to work as a female seafarer.

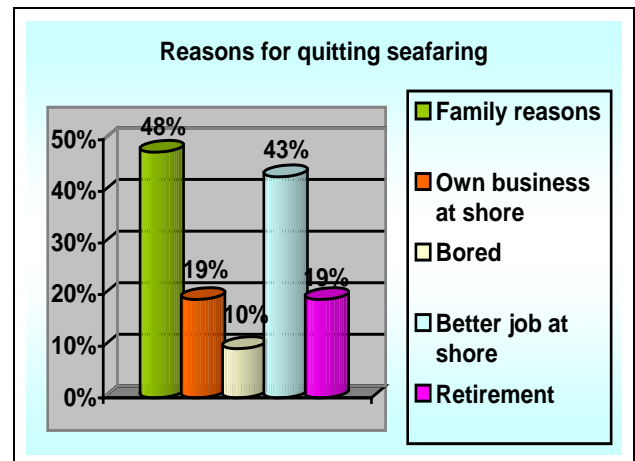


Fig.1. Reasons for quitting seafaring in the case of women seafarers

Most women (47.61%) believe they will quit this job due to family reasons, when they get married or they get pregnant.

Others consider they will quit seafaring when they find a better paid job at shore (42.85%), when get retired (19.04%), when they start their own business at shore (19.04%) or when they get bored of this job and they want to try something else (9.52%).

In conclusion, the results of the study show that the highest percentage of respondents believes that the main motivation for choosing jobs in shipping are, placed in the order of influence, the income, on first place, followed by the prospect of career advancement and attraction to the sea or to marine profession. Family encouragement or the intention

to continue the tradition are less important factors of influence for choosing a maritime career. The most likely to happen problems in a seafarer woman career is the discrimination against men and sexual harassment, followed by difficulties in operating mechanical equipment, accident risks, isolation, fatigue and increased workload. The highest percentage of respondents believe it's difficult to work as a female navigator and most of them will quit this job due to family reasons.

5 Conclusions

Seafarer women represent a strategic human resource in seafaring that can resolve the problem of world seafarers shortage. Also, the on-shore maritime industry can also benefit from human resources represented by women willing to seek a career in the maritime industry.

Most female included in the research believe they are discriminated against men and are not regarded as good workers from an equal perspective. Other problems likely to appear in a woman's career as seafarer are: sexual harassment, difficulties in operating mechanical equipment, feeling of isolation, accident risks, fatigue and increased workload.

In order to motivate joining women to the maritime sector, a number of steps need to be taken, including active promotion of seafaring as a potential career for female (as well as male) young people, dissemination of the positive experiences of companies employing women seafarers in order to diminish the perception of seafaring as a male job or the gender stereotypes of other maritime companies, implementation of policies addressing sexual harassment should be undertaken by all crewing and shipping companies. Where possible, the placement of female crewmembers (and particularly female cadets) should occur on vessels where they are not the lone female onboard and interested institutions should continue to develop policies relating to pregnancy and maternity benefits for seafaring women.

Problems like hostility from male crew and reluctance to accept women seafarers for employment, incidences of sexual harassment ranging from verbal sexualised comments to physical assault need to be effectively addressed by companies in order to ensure the continued retention of existing women seafarers and the recruitment of women seafarers in the future.

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