



Behind the curve

by Reverend Ijeoma Ajibade, *Regional Director Europe, The Mission to Seafarers*

As we all know, shipping has been a historically male-dominated industry. While bringing more women into the maritime world has been a key consideration for governments, NGOs, and global organisations in the sector, men are still 98% of the world's estimated 1.6 million seafarers. Change is taking place, but it is happening slowly. The entire maritime industry is responsible for providing women seafarers with the support, opportunities, and guidance they need to overcome the barriers they face, both in sea-going and shore-side job roles.

Women's social and economic development is an essential priority for many global organisations. Both the International Maritime Organization and the World Maritime University are responding to the issue of gender inclusion by setting out a clear rationale for the training and employment of women in maritime, including research to support this. Both institutions have developed various programmes and events encouraging the industry to share learning, expertise, and best practices on gender empowerment.

However, the reality is that gender and women's rights are still contentious issues, depending on where you are in the world. This can massively impact female seafarers

and their experiences at sea. From our position as a welfare charity, The Mission to Seafarers has deliberated on how we can better support female seafarers and improve understanding of what life at sea is like for these women.

This year, we created the **2022 Women Seafarers Report** that looks at the experiences and needs specific to female seafarers and how organisations can provide the best possible support to women at sea.

The maritime industry has recognised that more must be done to attract and retain women. Female seafarers face the same long hours and contracts, little job security and employment protection as their male counterparts, but they must also contend with persistent gender stereotypes and

discrimination. This discrimination affects working conditions, access to education and training, and career opportunities, but outstanding women seafarers have been working in the shipping industry despite these challenges. It all comes down to having the proper support to navigate life at sea as a woman.

Maritime welfare support had been traditionally developed to respond to the needs of male seafarers. Now that the number of women seafarers is on the rise, welfare organisations must consider what they can do to identify the needs of women seafarers and shape their services accordingly. Here are five key takeaways from the report, outlining challenges specific to female seafarers.

Access to maritime education and training

Women continue to face discrimination when it comes to maritime education and training. In some countries, women may be discouraged or find it difficult to enrol in nautical courses, and when they register,

they encounter training staff who are averse to their presence.

Some employers are reluctant to take on women cadets or qualified female seafarers due to the erroneous belief that women work

at sea for less time than men. This difficulty in placing women seafarers can impact college admissions, as statistics show that 100% placements at sea are a significant part of any maritime college marketing strategy and success.

A lack of inclusion and acceptance

Evidence shows that women seafarers can be confronted with a certain level of exclusion and sometimes resistance from their male colleagues. This can make it difficult for women seafarers to flourish at work. These attitudes can range from overt hostility to discriminatory comments dressed up as "humour," with the intention to get

the message across that the ship is not an appropriate workplace for a woman. This treatment can undermine not only the confidence of women seafarers but also create a hostile working environment.

Women in senior positions may experience difficulty with men who do not like taking orders from a female authority. Female

seafarers may also feel they need to work harder than their male counterparts to prove to everyone that they can do their job and are worthy of their position in the crew. Women end up having to jump through additional hoops to prove themselves and take on the burden of reassuring men that women seafarers have the right to be on board.

Sexual harassment and intimidation

Sexual harassment and intimidation are horrific challenges for women seafarers to face. They require firm action from all maritime industry sectors, and all vessels should be safe workplaces for women. Sexual harassment and intimidation take many forms at sea, from inappropriate remarks to threats, physical violence, and assault.

Women cope with sexual harassment in several different ways. They may withdraw from on-board social situations, or if they do attend, they may choose to leave events early. Some women lock themselves in their cabins at night for safety.

Many shipping companies have anti-harassment policies, backed by company

training and courses, and women seafarers tend to be positive about these initiatives and the dedication of their organisations to create a safer working environment. Women who believe their company is committed to eliminating sexual harassment are also more likely to come forward and make formal complaints about their experiences.



Photos: The Mission to Seafarers



Access to good healthcare

While far from a female-specific problem, access to healthcare on board can be challenging for women seafarers. On some vessels, seafarers are largely dependent on fellow crew members for medical consultations and treatment, resulting in awkward situations for women and impacting patient confidentiality. Another critical health challenge for women seafarers is the access to sanitary products and disposal of sanitary waste.

Use of on-board facilities

Crews often become small communities congregating in a vessel's limited space. Apart from the division of shipboard spaces and the use of facilities by rank, women may be informally excluded or may not feel comfortable in certain areas of the ship where, for example, pornography is watched or openly displayed, or TV sets dominated by shows targeted to a male audience.

In response, women seafarers may spend excessive time alone in their cabins. This kind of isolation may extend to shore leave as male seafarers may not invite female colleagues to join them when they go ashore.



Realising the benefits of a diverse workforce

While it is clear there is a gender gap in maritime, the good news is that there are actionable steps the industry can take to overcome these barriers and boost female welfare, as well as improve recruitment and retention.

Several maritime organisations and associations aim to provide women with peer support, where they can share experiences, find solutions to common challenges, and seek advice on career development and progression. These communities also promote the visibility of role models for women in maritime, showing that success is possible. This can empower women to continue their careers in the business and even acquire skills that can

put them on a path to achieving leadership positions.

By better understanding female seafarers' challenges, organisations can improve their support for women at sea. This can include everything from welfare support and creating gender-sensitive living conditions on board ships to no-tolerance policies for discrimination against female seafarers. Training for all staff on achieving a workplace free from violence and harassment can help enhance respect for diversity and reduce the burden on women seafarers to prove themselves worthy of the job they're more than qualified for.

Women seafarers bring a fresh perspective to the maritime industry and contribute to a diversity of thought and new ideas to find solutions to long-standing issues. Having a gender-balanced workforce also helps deliver the skills the industry needs to continue moving forward. While gender equity is a critical global priority, shipping remains behind the curve. By taking decisive action, the maritime sector can improve the working conditions of existing female seafarers and encourage more women to apply for job roles. By creating a more equitable working environment, the maritime industry will be able to recruit and retain more women seafarers and reap the rewards of a more diverse workforce. □



The Mission to Seafarers (MtS) provides help and support to the 1.6 million men and women who face danger every day to keep our global economy afloat. MtS works in over 200 ports in 50 countries, caring for seafarers of all ranks, nationalities, and beliefs. Through its global network of chaplains, staff and volunteers, MtS offers practical, emotional and spiritual support to seafarers through ship visits, drop-in seafarers' centres, and a range of welfare and emergency support services. Visit www.missiontoseafarers.org to learn more.