



Feature Journalist of the Year 2024 Runner up Submission

Lacey Jones

Cause if I was a man, I'd be the man

There are many unique challenges faced by a woman in maritime, but greater female empowerment can be universally beneficial. **Lacey Jones** investigates

According to the Chinese Zodiac, 2023 was the year of the rabbit – but ask anyone interested in pop culture and they'll tell you it belonged to women. Throughout the year the world was subject to female success, including the box office hit the Barbie movie, both the Eras and the Renaissance tours dominating the music industry along with their subsequent cinematic releases, and Taylor Swift herself being named Time's Person of the Year. To quote her fellow artist Beyoncé: "Who run the world? Girls."

Unfortunately, within the maritime industry that is so far from the truth. The International Maritime Organization's (IMO) 2021 Women in Maritime survey revealed that female seafarers account for less than 2% of the industry, with a majority of female seafarers employed on cruises. This is hardly surprising when considering the fact that when the IMO initiated its gender programme in 1988, women were largely barred from maritime training institutes.

In some countries this was the case for a long while, with training institutes in China, Egypt and Bangladesh only opening their doors to women in the late 2000s. Seafarer training is also sometimes still connected with the armed forces, which may not always be entirely accommodating to women. For example, the Indian Navy in 2018 told the Delhi High Court that it was a policy decision not to induct women in naval branches where sea-time was mandatory for promotion to the next rank. Only recently have they expanded the roles women can be recruited and trained in, and improved facilities to accommodate them.

Mariana Noceti, IMO's principal programme assistant for

its Women in Maritime (WIM) initiative, told **CM**: "Seafaring, specifically, is very much thought of as a man's profession in many countries and those attitudes take a long time to change." Evidently obtaining training is only the first of many obstacles an aspiring female seafarer may face, as Noceti added: "The other issue [women] encounter a lot is that even once they are trained, in some cases, anecdotally, private companies refuse to hire them, so they do not have the required time at sea to get their certifications."

Reflecting on the reason for this bias, founder of the Diversity Study Group (DSG) Heidi Heseltine noted that there is a lot of misconception around people's ability to do the role. Seafaring can be a very physical role and, rightly or wrongly, a hiring manager may see a petite female candidate and assume she could not do the job. Heseltine added that they are often under pressure to fill the role quickly.

"They don't have much time to find someone for that role, they know what's worked well in the past and therefore they think that will work well in the future, which is why you end up quite often not having that diversity," she said, adding that "it's not intentional or malicious" but it is something that needs to be addressed.

With this in mind, there's no telling how many women have undergone training only to be iced out of the profession or simply chosen another path or industry all together. While female seafarers are severely underrepresented, women are not entirely absent from the maritime industry. According to the 2021 survey, 39% of women within the surveyed companies work in mid-management, 28% in technical roles

This Page:

Left: Heidi Heseltine, founder of the Diversity Study Group
Right: Susanne Justesen, human sustainability project director at GMF

Opposite Page:

Left: Namrata Nadkarni, CEO of Intent Communications Ltd
Right: Mariana Noceti, IMO Women in Maritime principal programme assistant



and 48% in administrative and support roles.

Until recently, data similar to that gathered in the WIM survey was hard to come by. Although it was widely acknowledged women were a minority in this industry, only pockets of evidence existed to prove that. The 2021 survey was the first of its kind, with its second edition to be conducted later this year. Yet as the industry has come to realise, the right data can bring about significant changes and benefits.

Recognising this, Heseltine launched the DSG in 2019 with the aim to help companies understand how diversity can help contribute toward sustainable development. What little data available was usually gathered by the HR department, but Heseltine desired a more personal approach. Each year since its launch, the DSG study gathers anonymous data directly from employees to see where improvements need to be made. Heseltine added: "We were overwhelmed by what the data was telling us. It's so critical to hear from people themselves, because it's able to sometimes confirm what we're really thinking but also really shine a light on other areas and look at the regional nuances as well that we need to be tackling."

Heseltine herself has been in shipping for over 30 years, having started in tanker vessel operations. There she stayed for 12 years until moving into recruitment, citing the lack of opportunity to move from operations into the commercial roles she desired. Heseltine recalls there being very few women at that time, though noted that there were "pockets" with more women such as in a Norwegian-owned company she worked for.

The difficulty to succeed professionally is a common setback for women in the maritime industry. This issue is the first category of four that encompasses the 15 pain points for women at sea identified by the All Aboard Alliance's Diversity@Sea initiative. Based on the answers of the 115 female seafarers interviewed, one key pain point identified was a culture onboard where women get treated as less competent than their male colleagues.

Surprised by this, Susanne Justesen, project director of human sustainability at the Global Maritime Forum (GMF), told **CM**: "Before conducting the interviews, we were aware of the challenges associated with the physical conditions and the social relations for women onboard. But we were a bit surprised by the degree to which women found it difficult to

succeed professionally onboard.

"So many of them reported that they felt they were perceived as less competent every time they boarded a new vessel, and that they had to outperform and prove themselves so many times to each and every one of the male colleagues they were sailing with to be treated as a professional."

Namrata Nadkarni, CEO and founder of Intent Communications Ltd, told **CM**: "There's this notion that women are only hired because they're women. It's a big obstacle. We are asked not only to meet the criteria, but to prove ourselves literally every day. It's ridiculous."

Nadkarni noted that a good employer should never hire somebody who is not trained without offering them the training in order to succeed. "If you're just hiring people on the basis of gender, you're setting them up for failure," Nadkarni said.

Unequal access to on-the-job training onboard is another of Diversity@Sea's 15 pain points, alongside women being assigned different tasks to their male colleagues. Furthermore, often a vessel will never have more than one or two female seafarers onboard at a time which can only add to the social challenges of an already quite isolating career.

Nadkarni added: "If you're the unicorn, magical woman who is actually skilled enough to do X, Y, Z and you have one bad day – you can feel like you're ruining it for all these other women for whom you're supposed to be opening doors, and that is a lot of pressure to put on a single person."

WHEN EVERYONE BELIEVES YA, WHAT'S THAT LIKE?

"Obviously when you are the one that's different, you attract a lot of attention," Noceti said. Seafarers have recounted that being one of the only women onboard can be quite daunting, and sometimes dangerous. A conversation with a colleague can lead to rumours and gossip or open the door to harassment. Jokes at a woman's expense might cause uproar in a lad-orientated environment, but tension when you're the butt of a joke.

Such an experience is not limited to the maritime industry but rather, the same biases at play disillusion women from the day-to-day interactions on board a vessel to the glitz and glamour of a Hollywood award show. Even Barbie, which went on to win the Cinematic and Box Office achievement



at the 81st Golden Globes, was reduced to a film “based on a plastic doll with big boobs” by comedian Jo Koy at the event. For taking a sip of her drink in response to a joke made at her expense by the same comedian, Swift was accused of overreacting, yet Will Smith became a meme in 2022 when he slapped Chris Rock for his jokes.

Bullying, harassment, discrimination, and violence at sea is not exclusively tied to gender but it can be the kindling to it. Nadkarni said: “There is a fair bit of sexism in the industry that is extremely prevalent and very visible, which is a big problem on shore but a very, very large problem at sea.” Sexual abuse and sexual harassment are included within the 15 pain points, with the responses showing that women often feel isolated, unsupported and/or alone when onboard.

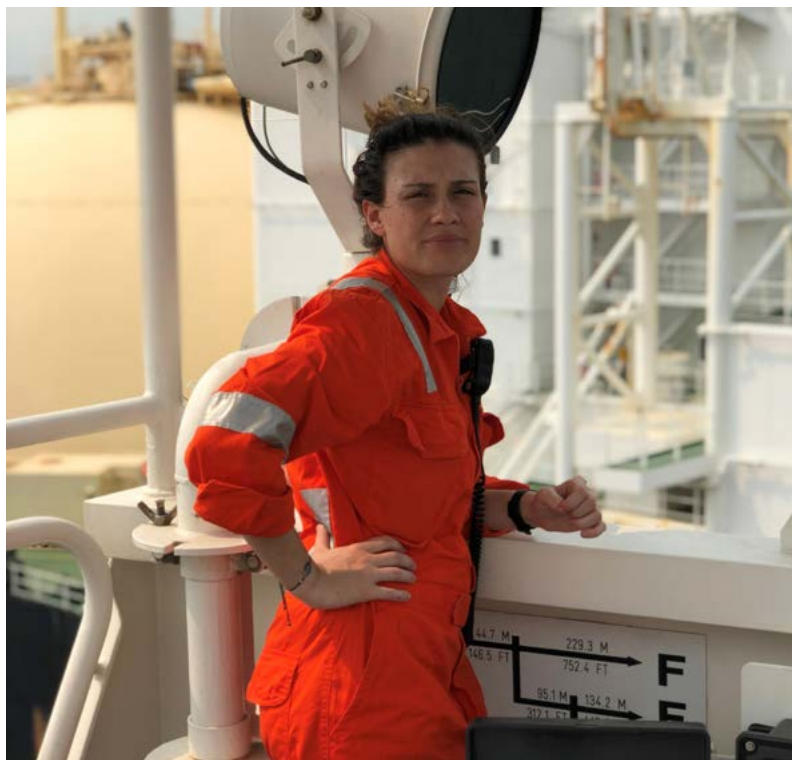
“All the stories we’ve heard about, power abuse and especially sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, harassment and assault that is taking place onboard where people don’t know where to go, what to do, and end up not necessarily talking to anyone about made everyone just want to take action; immediately – and we did,” Justesen added.

Similarly, charities such as Safer Waves exist to help seafarers regardless of gender who have experienced sexual violence, sexual harassment, or gender discrimination. Safer Waves offers support in the form of volunteers trained in the specific nature of these events happening onboard a vessel, aiming to treat all who come to them with the same level of care and respect and to speak up on behalf of seafarers where necessary.

The Diversity@Sea initiative also aims to tackle this issue alongside other pain points in a pilot project across 11 different vessels including tankers, bulk carriers and one container vessel. The first six vessels began sailing late last year, with data being gathered from November until the end of 2024. Justesen explained how leaders and experts from across the alliance worked together to co-design solutions towards each of the 15 pain points identified. This resulted in three measures being tested onboard (inclusive culture, prevention and response to bullying and abuse, and increased work/life flexibility) combined with five minimum requirements that all the vessels were required to live up to before they could join the pilot.

Firstly, each vessel was required to have at least four women on board with one of them as a senior officer to help with the gender imbalance. “It’s the first time any of them have tried sailing with that many women on board, so hopefully it’ll help us identify what are the consequences, the opportunities and what changes,” Justesen said. Secondly, the pilot requires the availability of more inclusive PPE equipment which can be just as useful to men as to women, as not everyone easily fits into the standard, one-size-fits-all products currently available onboard many vessels.

The third minimum requirement is good access to sanitary products and methods to dispose of them, in addition to a more advanced medical chest onboard which includes more female-led items. Justesen told **CM** how respondents told stories of disposing sanitary products overboard, only for it to fly back and be found by colleagues, or those who simply kept them in their cabin until they could dispose of it elsewhere. “It’s



an embarrassing thing for many women,” she added, which ultimately brings about a feeling of women not belonging on board.

Additionally, the pilot vessels are required to have 24/7 Wi-Fi access on board so that should an incident happen, seafarers have access to someone off-vessel in addition to a third-party helpline dedicated to help support people that experience harassment. Finally, the vessels were asked to set up specific measures to address bullying and abuse onboard and embed them into existing safety protocols.

Of course, there are larger systematic issues that cannot be changed in an instant. Almost all of the women being interviewed for the Diversity@Sea survey stated that seafarers’ contracts are simply too long and that being away from their family for an extended period of time becomes “unbearable”. Long contracts can also make family planning difficult, and unpaid maternity leave can become an obstacle for a woman’s career.

“For female seafarers, undoubtably one of the challenges they have is if they want to start a family, how do they do it? Because quite often they can’t remain on the ships if they’re pregnant,” Heseltine said. “Once they’ve given birth, what do they do? How do they manage their maternity or the early stages of being a mother? These are real practical challenges.”

Lack of childcare isn’t a challenge exclusive to women, either. The implementation of shared parental leave and sea-shore rotation programmes is beneficial to men as well. Justesen noted that there are some fathers on 10-month contracts that miss the birth of their children and are denied the chance to bond due to long periods away at sea.

THERE IS NO KEN WITHOUT BARBIE

A more concentrated effort to make the industry more welcoming and thus more diverse can only be beneficial to maritime as a whole. Employing people of different gender identities, from different cultural backgrounds and areas of the world can help strengthen a business and reduce its vulnerability to risks. Reducing the gender disparity is only one piece of the puzzle.

“We have always had women in shipping,” Heseltine said. “I’ve worked alongside women my entire career and met some incredible women along the way. I think what we’re doing now is we’re just taking a look at the benefits of having a broader and more diverse workforce in general and women are a part of that.”

Member organisations of the DSG have used the data collected in a variety of ways. Those in the early stages of inclusion and belonging are using it to get a sense of where they are positioned in comparison to others in the sector, while Heseltine noted that others are using the data to help inform their KPIs. As the collected data grows year-on-year, Heseltine explained that the DSG can help companies set realistic targets as the unique nature of the maritime industry makes it hard to compare to more established sectors.

Being a relative unknown to the wider public poses a challenge when trying to attract new talent to the maritime industry. Within its WIM programme, the IMO aims to rectify this. By shining a light on existing women in the industry and

raising awareness through outreach programmes and initiatives such as the International Day for Women in Maritime which takes place on May 18, the IMO strives to make the maritime industry more diverse. Organisations like the Women’s International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA), which aims to attract and support women at the management level in the maritime, trading and logistics sectors, only help to further support this goal. But there is more work to be done.

“I always think this is not an issue for women to solve,” Noceti said. “For me working in gender matters, I’m in rooms full of women which I love but we need to ensure that men have a higher stake in the matter because this is not something that we can do on our own.” She added that it’s been demonstrated that companies that have a more diverse workforces are more innovative.

Nadkarni agreed that allies play an important role in helping to support women in maritime. “There are solid examples of men who are doing it right,” she said. “And I’m really pleased, and it matters. I can say as someone who’s benefitted from being in conversations with them and receiving that kind of support it’s genuinely changed my world, and there’s no reason that more people shouldn’t do it.”

Women can be their own allies too. Oftentimes a panel at a maritime event will consist almost entirely of men, give or take the occasional woman who might be given the role of moderator. Noceti said: “Which means that you’re missing that input because the moderator obviously is not going to be part of that conversation in the same way.”

Nadkarni pointed out that once a woman has “proved” herself, she will be called to speak again and again. “We need to pass the mic,” she said. “The real issue is that usually there’s only room for one woman on a panel, so passing up an opportunity often equates to going back to being invisible.”

Finding new, just-as-competent women to speak on a panel has never been easier, either. The IMO and WISTA offer a free-to-use database called the Maritime Speakers Bureau which provides the public with a global database of female experts in all fields of maritime.

Nadkarni also pointed out the “chicken and the egg” scenario where conference programmers say they need known names on the panel to draw a crowd. “You have somebody who comes in and says something that’s really interesting, you’re still delivering value to your audience. You could afford one or two new people on the panel,” she said. “If you need everybody to be an established person with 20 years of experience, you’re going to get the same people again.”

Making the maritime industry more diverse is not going to happen overnight and it won’t be easy either. Nadkarni said that the industry “shouldn’t be afraid of getting it wrong”. There will be success stories and there will be fumbles and both will be necessary to make the industry a more inclusive place.

“If you really want to make this place better, do it. Stop waiting for perfect. Perfection is the enemy of progress. Start somewhere, get it wrong, try something different, get it wrong. Try something different until you get it right. And then, once you get it right, share that information. Make it easy for other people to get it right. Offer to help and open those doors,” Nadkarni said.

Opposite Page:

Top: Nicholine Tifuh

Azirh onboard a

vessel. Credit: IMO

Flickr

Middle: Crew working

for Chelsea Logistics,

Philippines. Credit:

IMO Flickr

Bottom: Being the

only woman on board

can be isolating.

Credit: IMO Flickr