

WOMEN SEAFARERS AND MARITIME PROFESSIONALS: EXPLORING GENDER INCLUSION IN THE SHIPPING SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

The maritime industry is one of the most significant sectors contributing to global trade, transportation, and economic development. However, it has historically remained a male-dominated sector with limited participation of women in seafaring and maritime professions. In recent decades, increasing awareness of gender equality, technological advancement, and international policy initiatives have encouraged greater involvement of women in shipping companies and maritime organizations. This research article examines the status, challenges, and opportunities of women seafarers and maritime professionals through secondary data analysis. The study utilizes information from international organizations, government reports, academic publications, and maritime industry documents to understand women's participation, workplace experiences, and barriers to career advancement. The findings reveal that although women's representation in maritime professions has gradually increased, significant challenges remain, including gender stereotypes, limited employment opportunities, workplace discrimination, safety concerns, and inadequate leadership representation. The study highlights the importance of gender-responsive policies, inclusive organizational cultures, professional training, and institutional support to promote sustainable participation of women in the maritime sector. Enhancing women's inclusion in shipping is essential not only for achieving gender equality but also for strengthening diversity, innovation, and sustainable development within the global maritime workforce.

KEYWORDS: Women Seafarers, Maritime Industry, Gender Equality, Shipping Companies, Gender Inclusion, Women Empowerment, Maritime Workforce

INTRODUCTION

The maritime industry is a vital component of the global economy, facilitating international trade, transportation, and connectivity among nations. Shipping companies transport a significant proportion of global goods and provide employment opportunities across various professional categories, including seafaring, marine engineering, logistics, port management, and maritime administration. Despite its economic importance, the maritime sector has traditionally been characterized by gender inequality, with women representing a considerably smaller proportion of the workforce.

Historically, maritime occupations have been associated with physical strength, technical expertise, and prolonged periods away from home. These perceptions have contributed to the exclusion of women from seafaring careers and reinforced the belief that maritime professions are primarily suitable for men. Social expectations, limited access to maritime education, safety concerns, and workplace discrimination have further restricted women's participation in this field.

However, globalization and changing social perspectives have gradually transformed the maritime sector. Women are increasingly entering professional maritime roles as ship officers, marine engineers, naval architects, logistics specialists, port managers, and maritime educators. Their participation challenges traditional gender norms and demonstrates the importance of diversity in improving organizational performance and innovation.

Gender equality in the maritime sector is closely connected with global sustainable development goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5, which emphasizes achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. International organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) have initiated programmes to encourage women's participation, education, and leadership in maritime professions.

Although progress has been achieved, women continue to face various challenges in accessing and sustaining maritime careers. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from governments, educational institutions, maritime organizations, and shipping companies. This study explores women's participation in the shipping sector, examines the barriers faced by women maritime professionals, and highlights strategies for promoting gender inclusion.

Table 1: Global Status of Women's Participation in the Maritime Sector

S.no.	Indicator	Status/Observation
1	Nature of Maritime Industry	Traditionally male-dominated sector with limited female representation
2	Women's Participation in Seafaring	Women constitute a very small proportion of global seafarers
3	Growth Trend	Gradual increase in women entering maritime education and professions
4	Major Areas of Employment	Deck officers, marine engineers, port management, logistics, maritime administration, and education
5	Leadership Representation	Women remain underrepresented in senior positions such as ship masters and maritime executives
6	Major Concern	Gender imbalance continues despite international commitments towards equality

Source: Compiled from IMO, BIMCO–ICS Seafarer Workforce Reports, and maritime research studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Miyuki Kitada (2015) in the study titled “*Women Seafarers: An Analysis of Barriers to Their Participation in the Maritime Sector*” examined the factors that influence women’s entry and participation in seafaring professions. The study adopted a qualitative methodology based on interviews, case studies, and an analysis of existing maritime literature. The findings revealed that gender stereotypes, male-dominated workplace culture, limited career advancement opportunities, and insufficient institutional support are significant barriers affecting women’s participation in the maritime sector. The study emphasized the need for organizational transformation, gender-sensitive policies, and supportive workplace practices to encourage women’s long-term participation in seafaring careers.

Angela MacNeil and Samrat Ghosh (2017) conducted a study titled “*Gender Imbalance in the Maritime Industry: Impediments, Initiatives and Recommendations*” to analyse the factors contributing to gender inequality in the maritime sector. The study was based on a review of maritime industry reports, research publications, and secondary data sources. The authors found that historical occupational segregation, traditional social perceptions, and inadequate representation of women in leadership positions are major factors responsible for gender imbalance. The study recommended the implementation of inclusive recruitment strategies, professional development programmes, and institutional initiatives to improve women’s representation and career progression in maritime professions.

International Labour Organization (ILO) (2015) published a report titled “*Women Seafarers: Global Employment Policies and Practices*” focusing on the employment experiences and working conditions of women seafarers worldwide. The report analysed international employment policies, maritime regulations, and workforce-related data to understand the challenges faced by women in the maritime sector. The findings highlighted issues related to recruitment barriers, limited access to training opportunities, workplace discrimination, and safety concerns on-board ships. The report recommended equal employment opportunities, improved working conditions, and supportive policies to enhance the participation and retention of women in maritime occupations.

International Maritime Organization (IMO) (2021) through its initiative “*Women in Maritime Programme: Promoting Gender Equality in the Maritime Sector*” analysed the importance of increasing women’s participation in maritime activities. The study was based on secondary data obtained from global maritime reports, institutional records, and industry-level information. The findings emphasized that education, professional training, capacity-building programmes, and leadership opportunities are essential for improving women’s representation in the maritime workforce. The initiative recognized gender diversity as a key factor contributing to sustainable development, innovation, and efficiency in the maritime industry.

World Maritime University (WMU) (2020) conducted research on “*Gender Equality and Empowerment in the Maritime Sector*” to examine women’s participation in maritime education and employment. The study utilized global maritime education data, employment reports, and research-based evidence to analyse gender-related challenges in the sector. The findings revealed that although women’s participation in maritime education has increased, their transition from education to professional employment remains challenging due to workplace barriers, limited mentorship opportunities, and inadequate support systems. The study highlighted the importance of creating supportive workplace environments, strengthening professional networks, and implementing gender-responsive policies to empower women in maritime careers.

The reviewed studies reveal that women's participation in the maritime sector is gradually improving; however, gender disparities continue due to social, institutional, and organizational barriers. The literature consistently highlights the importance of inclusive policies, professional training, workplace safety, mentorship, and leadership opportunities for achieving gender equality in shipping companies. However, limited studies have focused on the combined impact of organizational practices, career advancement opportunities, and gender inclusion strategies within shipping companies. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this research gap by analysing the status, challenges, and opportunities of women seafarers and maritime professionals using secondary data.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the status of women's participation in the shipping and maritime sector.
- To analyse the challenges faced by women seafarers and maritime professionals.
- To study the role of policies and institutional initiatives in promoting gender inclusion.
- To identify strategies for enhancing women's empowerment and career advancement in shipping companies.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on secondary data analysis. The required information has been collected from various authentic sources, including international organization reports, government publications, research journals, books, maritime industry reports, and online databases. Major sources of information include reports published by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Sustainable Development Goals reports, World Maritime University publications, maritime research studies, and industry documents. A descriptive and analytical research approach has been adopted to understand the existing status of women in maritime professions. The collected information has been systematically reviewed and interpreted to identify major trends, challenges, and opportunities related to gender inclusion in the shipping sector.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE SHIPPING SECTOR

The participation of women in the maritime sector has witnessed gradual improvement in recent years; however, their representation remains considerably low compared to men. The shipping industry continues to be one of the most gender-segregated sectors globally. Women's involvement is visible not only in traditional shore-based administrative roles but also in technical and operational positions such as ship officers, marine engineers, maritime educators, port managers, logistics professionals, and naval architects.

The increasing availability of maritime education and professional training programmes has encouraged more women to enter the sector. Women graduates from maritime academies are increasingly choosing careers as deck officers, marine engineers, and other specialized maritime professionals. Their contribution has challenged traditional perceptions regarding women's ability to perform technical and operational roles in shipping.

According to global maritime reports, women constitute only a small percentage of the total seafarer workforce. Although their participation has improved, the rate of growth remains slow due to persistent structural and cultural barriers. Women continue to face difficulties in accessing employment opportunities, gaining professional recognition, and reaching leadership positions within maritime organizations.

The presence of women in maritime professions contributes to workplace diversity and organizational effectiveness. Diverse teams often encourage innovation, improved decision-making, and better problem-solving approaches. Therefore, increasing women's

participation is not only an issue of equality but also a strategic requirement for the sustainable development of the maritime industry.

Table 2: Factors Influencing Women's Participation in Shipping Companies

Positive Factors Encouraging Participation	Barriers Limiting Participation
Availability of maritime education	Social stereotypes
International gender equality initiatives	Male-dominated workplace culture
Skill development programmes	Safety concerns
Equal employment policies	Lack of mentorship
Technological advancement	Limited leadership opportunities
Organizational support	Work-family responsibilities

Table 3: International Initiatives Promoting Gender Inclusion in Maritime Sector

Organization/Initiative	Major Contribution
International Maritime Organization (IMO) – Women in Maritime Programme	Promotes training, employment opportunities, and leadership participation of women
International Labour Organization (ILO)	Supports decent work conditions and equal employment rights for seafarers
United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5	Promotes gender equality and empowerment of women
World Maritime University	Provides education and research opportunities related to gender equality
Maritime Training Institutions	Encourage women through professional education and skill development

Challenges Faced by Women Seafarers and Maritime Professionals

Although women have made significant progress in entering maritime professions, they continue to encounter multiple challenges that affect their career development and professional sustainability.

Gender Stereotypes and Social Perceptions

One of the major barriers affecting women's participation in shipping is the continuation of gender stereotypes. Maritime occupations are often perceived as physically demanding and unsuitable for women. Such assumptions discourage many young women from choosing maritime education and professional careers.

Social expectations regarding women's roles in family responsibilities also influence career decisions. Long periods away from home, extended voyages, and irregular working schedules create additional concerns for women and their families.

Limited Employment and Career Advancement Opportunities

Women maritime professionals often experience difficulties in obtaining equal employment opportunities. Some shipping companies continue to prefer male candidates due to traditional beliefs regarding on-board work environments.

Career advancement is another major challenge. Women are underrepresented in senior positions such as ship captains, chief engineers, and managerial roles. The absence of women leaders reduces opportunities for mentorship and professional guidance for younger women entering the sector.

Workplace Discrimination and Harassment

Women working in male-dominated maritime environments may experience discrimination, exclusion, and unequal treatment. Some women report difficulties in gaining

acceptance and recognition from colleagues. Workplace harassment and inappropriate behaviour remain important concerns affecting women's safety and professional confidence. Creating respectful and secure working environments is essential for encouraging women's participation and retention.

Safety and Working Conditions

The unique nature of maritime employment creates specific challenges for women. Ships often operate for extended periods in isolated environments, making workplace safety a significant concern. Adequate accommodation facilities, privacy arrangements, healthcare support, and effective complaint mechanisms are necessary to ensure a comfortable and secure working environment for women seafarers.

Work-Life Balance

The maritime profession involves long periods away from family and limited opportunities for personal interaction. These conditions create challenges, particularly for women who often face greater expectations regarding family responsibilities. Shipping companies need to develop flexible and supportive policies to improve work-life balance and retain skilled women professionals.

Gender Inclusion Initiatives in the Maritime Sector

Promoting gender inclusion requires coordinated efforts from international organizations, governments, maritime institutions, and shipping companies.

International Maritime Organization Initiatives

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has implemented the Women in Maritime Programme to encourage gender equality in the maritime sector. The programme focuses on improving access to maritime education, training opportunities, and employment for women.

The initiative recognizes that increasing women's participation strengthens the maritime workforce and contributes to sustainable development.

Education and Skill Development

Maritime education institutions play an important role in encouraging women to enter the industry. Scholarships, awareness programmes, career counselling, and professional training can increase women's participation in maritime occupations. Providing equal access to technical education enables women to develop the skills required for successful maritime careers.

Organizational Policies

Shipping companies can promote gender inclusion by adopting equal opportunity policies, transparent recruitment procedures, and fair promotion systems. Companies should also establish mechanisms to prevent discrimination and harassment.

Gender-sensitive workplace practices help create an environment where women can perform effectively and advance professionally.

Women's Leadership Development

Encouraging women's leadership in maritime organizations is essential for achieving long-term gender equality. Leadership development programmes, mentorship opportunities, and professional networks can support women in reaching higher positions. Greater representation of women in decision-making roles can contribute to the development of more inclusive maritime policies.

Table: 4 Role of Shipping Companies in Promoting Gender Equality

Areas of Intervention	Expected Outcomes
Equal recruitment practices	Increased women's participation
Gender-sensitive workplace policies	Improved employee satisfaction
Safety and harassment prevention mechanisms	Secure working environment
Leadership development programmes	Increased women managers and

	executives
Training and skill enhancement	Better professional performance
Diversity management strategies	Improved organizational effectiveness

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Based on the analysis of secondary data, the following findings have been identified:

- Women's participation in the maritime sector has increased gradually, but their overall representation remains limited.
- Gender stereotypes continue to influence women's career choices and professional opportunities.
- Workplace discrimination, safety concerns, and inadequate facilities remain significant barriers for women seafarers.
- Maritime education and training opportunities play an important role in increasing women's participation.
- Institutional initiatives and gender-inclusive policies contribute significantly to improving women's professional advancement.
- Women's representation in leadership positions remains low, highlighting the need for stronger career development strategies.
- A supportive organizational culture is essential for retaining women in maritime careers.
- Gender diversity contributes positively to innovation, efficiency, and sustainable development within shipping organizations.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PROMOTING GENDER INCLUSION IN SHIPPING COMPANIES

Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. **Strengthening Gender Equality Policies:** Shipping companies should develop clear gender equality policies that ensure equal opportunities in recruitment, promotion, and professional development.
2. **Improving Maritime Education Opportunities:** Governments and educational institutions should encourage more women to pursue maritime education through scholarships, awareness campaigns, and training programmes.
3. **Ensuring Safe Workplaces:** Effective measures should be implemented to prevent harassment and discrimination. Ships and maritime workplaces should provide safe, respectful, and supportive environments.
4. **Providing Mentorship and Career Support:** Mentorship programmes connecting experienced maritime professionals with young women can improve confidence, skill development, and career progression.
5. **Increasing Women's Representation in Leadership:** Shipping companies should encourage women's participation in managerial and decision-making positions through leadership development programmes.
6. **Creating Work-Life Balance Policies:** Flexible working arrangements and supportive family-friendly policies can help women continue their maritime careers successfully.
7. **Promoting Social Awareness:** Awareness programmes should challenge traditional gender stereotypes and highlight successful women maritime professionals as role models.

CONCLUSION

Women seafarers and maritime professionals represent an important emerging workforce contributing to the transformation of the shipping sector. Although women's participation has improved over the years, significant challenges continue to restrict their full inclusion in maritime careers. Gender inequality in the maritime sector is influenced by social attitudes, workplace practices, limited representation, and structural barriers.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach involving policy reforms, organizational commitment, education, and social change. Creating inclusive maritime workplaces will benefit not only women professionals but also the entire shipping industry by improving diversity, innovation, and operational effectiveness. Women's participation should be viewed not merely as a matter of equality but as an essential component of sustainable maritime development. The future of the shipping sector depends on utilizing the skills, knowledge, and leadership potential of all individuals regardless of gender. Therefore, promoting women's empowerment and gender inclusion in maritime professions is crucial for building a more equitable and sustainable global maritime workforce.

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