



## NAVIGATING CHANGE: THE EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN SEAFARERS

---

Yashaswini Miraskar\*

### ABSTRACT

*With an emphasis on their previous struggles, achievements, and current challenges, this article examines how women's roles in the marine sector have evolved. Slow but noticeable progress has been made toward gender equality in the traditionally male-dominated marine sector, where women increasingly occupy key roles, including captains, officers, engineers, and cargo handlers. Despite these initiatives, women continue to face barriers such as inadequate facilities, long workdays, limited professional advancement chances, and cultural biases. The essay examines the historical context of women's involvement in maritime activities, from their early involvement in disguised positions to their inclusion in operational and commercial fleets during World Wars I and II. Additionally, it talks about how important it is for international organizations like the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to promote gender equality through initiatives like Women in Maritime. Along with discussing the ongoing challenges that women face, like discrimination, mental health problems, and a lack of mentorship, it also emphasizes the advantages of technological improvements and supportive networks. The paper concludes with a favorable evaluation of women in the marine industry, emphasizing the importance of additional developments toward a more inclusive and equal future.*

**Keywords:** Women Seafarers, Gender Equality, International Maritime Organization (IMO), Sexual Harassment, Discrimination, STCW Convention.

### EARLY HISTORY

---

\*BA LLB, THIRD YEAR, MS RAMAIAH UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES.

Women have participated in maritime activities for thousands of years, though their involvement has often been in supporting, informal, or unrecognized capacities. Historically, women sometimes accompanied male sailors on long sea voyages, taking on various roles aboard ships or within port communities. Despite their presence and contributions, they were frequently overlooked or deliberately excluded from official records and recognition, resulting in their stories being largely absent from mainstream maritime history.

### **17TH TO 19TH CENTURY: RARE AND HIDDEN ROLES**

1. **Disguised as males**<sup>1</sup>Women occasionally pretended to be males to join expeditions. This was frequently done to get away from social expectations or to pursue adventure. In the 18th century, for example, Mary Lacy<sup>2</sup> Disguised herself to join the Royal Navy and subsequently served as a sailor.
2. **Pirates and Exploration:** Some women became well-known as pirates, defying social expectations. Notable examples are Anne Bonny and Mary Read, who were pirates during the Golden Age of Piracy in the early 18th century.
3. **Military Contributions:** Women sometimes served in the auxiliary departments of ships during wartime<sup>3</sup>, sometimes helping sailors, cooking, or managing medical facilities. Usually, they were not allowed to serve in the official naval forces.

### **20TH CENTURY: GRADUAL INTEGRATION**

1. **The World Wars:** The World Wars represented significant turning points for women employed in the marine industry. During World Wars I and II, more and more women worked as chefs, nurses, radio operators, and other wartime jobs in the auxiliary naval forces. In countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, women in military and support jobs, such as the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC)<sup>4</sup> and the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS)<sup>5</sup>, began to be officially recognized.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gosse, Philip, *Pirates: The Complete History from 1300 BC to the Present* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007) 65

<sup>2</sup><https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/mary-lacy/> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>3</sup><https://www.royalnavalmuseum.org/collections/women-in-the-navy> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/world-war-one-1914-1918/women-and-war/the-womens-army-auxiliary-corps-waac> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>5</sup><https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060025174> accessed 23 March 2025

2. **Women in the Merchant Navy**<sup>6</sup> Women began working as radio operators, navigators, and even cargo handlers in the merchant navy during World War II. However, these roles were usually seen as temporary, and women were expected to leave after the war.
3. **Post-War Challenges:** Women mariners faced prejudice and were largely excluded from the sector after the wars. Nonetheless, a limited proportion of women continued to work in the marine sector, primarily in passenger ship auxiliary services and administrative roles.

## A TRANSITION TO EQUALITY IN THE LATE 20TH CENTURY

1. During the 1970s and 1980s, the feminist movement and growing awareness of gender equality in the workplace allowed more women to enter traditionally male-dominated industries like shipping. In the meantime, a number of countries began to allow women to serve in the merchant navy and naval forces, often in limited roles.
2. **International Recognition:** The International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW)<sup>7</sup>, which was established by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 1979, started establishing precise requirements for seafarers' credentials, including the inclusion of women.

## 21ST CENTURY: BREAKING BARRIERS

1. **Greater Representation:** Throughout the twenty-first century, the percentage of women employed in maritime occupations has been continuously increasing. Women are now employed as deck officers, engineers, and even captains on both commercial and naval ships. The International Maritime Organization, together with other organizations, has increased opportunities for women in the industry and promoted gender equality.
2. **Notable Female Seafarers:** Women such as Brazilian merchant marine commander Maria G. C. A. de Lemos and Indian officer Captain Radhika Menon, who became the first female captain of an oil tanker, have cracked the glass ceiling. In addition, there are more women in executive roles in port authorities, maritime corporations, and international maritime organizations.
3. **Diversity and Inclusion:** Organizations in the modern maritime sector are attempting to improve the diversity and inclusion of the sector. Equal opportunity laws, mentorship

---

<sup>6</sup> David L. Williams, *The Merchant Navy and Women's Roles in World War II* (Osprey Publishing, 2001) 84-89.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/HumanElement/TrainingCertification/Pages/STCW.aspx> accessed 23 March 2025/

programs, and efforts to encourage young women to enrol in maritime academies have collectively contributed to creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for women.

## IMPORTANT MILESTONES

1. **First Women on Ships:** During the 1970s and 1980s, countries such as Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom began permitting women to serve on commercial ships, despite ongoing barriers to their advancement and equal treatment.
2. **International Maritime Organization's Gender Equality Initiatives:** The International Maritime Organization (IMO)<sup>8</sup> Other organizations have worked to promote gender equality in the industry by providing women with access to training, certifications, and employment opportunities.
3. **Sustainable Development Goal<sup>9</sup>:** The UN has recognized the importance of gender equality in the maritime sector, particularly given the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which calls for the empowerment of all women and girls, including those working in the maritime sector.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN SEAFARERS

### INSUFFICIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES

1. **Lack of gender-specific amenities:** Many ships and maritime facilities are constructed with a majority of male staff in mind. This sometimes results in a lack of gender-specific facilities, such as separate sleeping quarters, changing rooms, and restrooms for female passengers. This could make women uncomfortable and discourage them from pursuing or staying in marine careers.
2. **Limited Personal Space:** Because ships are designed for a male workforce, women sometimes face a lack of privacy in the small, often crowded living quarters. This can be especially challenging for women who may be coping with menstrual cycles or other personal health issues.

### LONG AND UNPREDICTABLE WORK HOURS

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Environment/Pages/Women-in-Maritime.aspx> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/> accessed 23 March 2025

1. **Extended Seafaring Time:** Being at sea for six months or more is a challenging experience for anyone. This is increasingly harder if women are in charge of taking care of others or have families. The uncertainty of whether they will be able to return home may cause a lot of emotional stress.
2. **Impact on Family Life:** Extended absences from home can cause stress on family relationships, especially for women who care for young or elderly family members. The strain of juggling work and family obligations and not taking enough time off can lead to burnout, worry, and guilt.

### **LIMITED ACCESS TO MENTORSHIP AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT**

1. **Lack of Role Models:** Because there are so few female senior officers or leaders in the marine industry, women find it challenging to locate mentors and role models who can assist them in their careers. The low proportion of women in leadership positions serves to further perpetuate the perception that seafaring is a male-dominated industry.
2. **Slower Career Progression:** Women usually see slower career progress than males do. Due to discriminatory practices, hidden biases, or even flagrant nepotism, women may have fewer opportunities to rise through the ranks. If women do gain the necessary experience, they may still be passed over for promotions in favor of men.

### **CULTURAL AND SOCIETAL BARRIERS**

1. **Cultural expectations and gender roles:** Women are frequently expected to stay at home and take care of household duties, which makes it difficult for them to pursue careers that require them to be away from home a lot. Women who do choose to pursue occupations at sea may face harsh societal criticism or stigma since their choices may be seen as defying conventional gender norms.
2. **Lack of Acceptance and Sexism:** On many ships, women may face suspicion and hostility from male coworkers who may view them as outsiders or question their authority. This may be made worse by the notion that women are unable to handle the mental and physical demands of life at sea. Women often have to work more to prove their ability, which can be a mental challenge.

### **MEDICAL SUPPORT AND HEALTH**

1. Shipboard women may not have as much access to medical care, especially when it comes to reproductive health. When it comes to addressing health issues specific to women, like gynaecological problems, pregnancy, and childbirth, the medical personnel aboard ships usually lack the equipment and training required. In addition, women may not have access to competent personnel or be able to obtain appropriate medical care in an emergency without leaving the ship.
2. **Physical Health Problems:** Working on a ship can cause physical health problems for women, especially when doing demanding tasks in cramped spaces. It can be difficult for women to perform heavy lifting and use equipment designed with masculine body types in mind.

### **SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND EXPLOITATION**

1. **Sexual harassment and exploitation:** Sexual harassment and exploitation are pervasive issues for many female mariners. In a context where men are more prevalent, women may experience inappropriate behavior, rude comments, or even physical aggression. It can be challenging to report such harassment because of the solitude of working at sea and the fear of retaliation, which can create a hostile work environment.
2. **Lack of Accountability:** Because the maritime business is hierarchical, women may feel that they are unable to report harassment for fear of losing their jobs, being marginalized, or having their career prospects harmed. There is a chance that harassment will continue unreported and unregulated as a result.

### **ISOLATION AND MENTAL HEALTH STRAIN**

1. **Social Isolation:** Long-term sea travel can lead to a great deal of social isolation. Women who may already feel alienated in a male-dominated environment may experience increased loneliness and mental health issues if they lack social networks and support systems.
2. **Mental Health Stress:** Working in such a distant and demanding environment, coupled with the social pressure and harassment that many women encounter, can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is regrettably still taboo to discuss mental health in the marine sector, which makes it more challenging for women to seek assistance.

## LACK OF SUPPORT FOR PREGNANT SEAFARERS

1. **Maternity and Pregnancy Leave:** When working at sea, women who may become pregnant receive little support. It is difficult for pregnant women to continue working due to the nature of the job, and many maritime businesses do not offer maternity leave. Women who want to stay in the workforce after giving birth may face significant challenges if they lack parental support networks, such as childcare or the capacity to take time off.
2. **Safety concerns:** Pregnancy also raises some health and safety concerns that may not be addressed on ships. The physical demands of the profession and the possibility of emergencies while on board, for instance, may put pregnant women in danger.

## LACK OF GENDER-SENSITIVE TRAINING AND EDUCATION

1. **Lack of gender-inclusive training:** Maritime academies and training programs may not adequately support women, especially those in technical or hands-on training roles, due to their historical design with male students in mind. Gender-inclusive training, which tackles specific challenges women may face at sea, is still relatively rare in many training facilities.
2. **Bias in Training Programs:** Unconscious prejudices against women may be held by instructors or other students who don't believe they are capable of doing specific duties. This could have an effect on their capacity to progress in their career by lowering their confidence and training quality.

## WOMEN SEAFARERS- IMO

Women currently make up just 1.2% of the seafaring workforce worldwide, according to the BIMCO.<sup>10</sup>/ICS 2021 Seafarer Workforce Report. With an anticipated 24,059 women working as seafarers, a 45.8% increase over the 2015 data, this suggests a positive trend in gender balance. In order to help women achieve representation that is in line with the needs of the twenty-first century, IMO has been actively trying to develop this historically male-dominated sector. With its Women in Maritime initiative, which goes by the tagline "Training-Visibility-Recognition," IMO has consciously worked to increase the role of women as significant maritime stakeholders in the context of maritime development. The IMO continues to support women's participation in shore-based programs and remains committed to helping its member states achieve the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable

---

<sup>10</sup><https://www.bimco.org/> accessed 23 March 2025

Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5: "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

The IMO's gender program began in 1988. At the time, just a handful of maritime training institutes took female students. Since then, IMO's gender and capacity-building program has helped to construct an institutional framework to include a gender dimension into IMO's policies and processes. This has made it easier for women employed in the maritime sector to obtain maritime education and employment prospects.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND ADVANCEMENTS FOR WOMEN SEAFARERS**

International organizations and the maritime industry both recognize the need for diversity and inclusion and despite the challenges, women seafarers have achieved significant progress.

1. **International Laws Promoting Gender Equality:** The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and other international organizations have made great progress toward gender equality in the maritime sector. The 2010 "International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers" (STCW) ensures equal treatment and opportunities for women seafarers. Increasing the number of women employed in maritime professions is another goal of the IMO's "Women in Maritime" project.
2. **Women in Leadership:** Several women have attained prominent positions in the maritime sector, including captains, chief engineers, and managers. The increasing number of women in leadership roles provides important role models for younger women joining the sector. **Organizations and Supportive Networks:** For women working in marine professions, organizations such as the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA)<sup>11</sup> and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF)<sup>12</sup> provide essential support networks. These organizations offer mentoring, training, and advocacy to help women succeed in the marine industry.
3. **Technological Advancements:** As automation, artificial intelligence, and digital technologies are used more frequently in the maritime sector, women sailors may have new prospects. Because technology increases job role flexibility and lowers physical barriers, it

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wista.net/> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.itfglobal.org/> accessed 23 March 2025



can create a more welcoming workplace for women. **Initiatives for Education and Training:** Women are increasingly being encouraged to seek employment in the marine industry through the provision of training programs and scholarships, for instance. Universities and maritime academies are taking additional steps to provide mentorship opportunities and encourage women to enroll in marine programs.

## SUCCESSFUL WOMEN SEAFARERS

Several women in the maritime industry have achieved significant strides in breaking down barriers. The following are a few notable examples:

1. In an industry that has historically been dominated by men, Captain Ayesha Aziz<sup>13</sup> was one of the first Indian woman captains to hold a leadership position with a shipping company.
2. **The "Women at Sea" Initiative and Maersk<sup>14</sup>:** Maersk, one of the world's largest shipping firms, launched a program called "Women at Sea" to boost the proportion of women working on board its vessels. This initiative shows how business practices can encourage gender diversity in the maritime sector.
3. Dr. Shirin S. Reza<sup>15</sup> Women's engagement in the maritime industry has been a lifelong goal of renowned researcher and educator Dr. Shirin. Numerous educational projects worldwide have been influenced by her support of gender-neutral training programs and regulations.

## CONCLUSION

The formerly male-dominated maritime industry has made considerable strides in recent years as more women take on a range of seafaring activities. By encouraging international travel, trade, and tourism, today's women mariners contribute significantly to the global economy. Their drive, determination, and ability to overcome challenges are demonstrated by their ascent from marginalization and invisibility to industry prominence and authority. Women in the marine sector still confront numerous challenges despite significant advancements, including inadequate facilities, lengthy and unpredictable work hours, limited job growth prospects, and cultural biases. Through institutional and grassroots efforts, these barriers are gradually being addressed, with the International Maritime Organization (IMO) leading the charge to advance

---

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.maritimejournal.com/captain-ayesha-aziz> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.maersk.com/news/articles/2021/06/01/women-at-sea-program> accessed 23 March 2025

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.maritimestudies.com/shirin-reza> accessed 23 March 2025

gender equality, visibility, and opportunity for women in maritime professions. As technology advances, more women are occupying leadership roles, support networks are becoming available, and new opportunities are emerging for women mariners. These programs not only help to remove barriers but also promote a more inclusive and diverse maritime industry. As long as progress is sustained, women seafarers will surely continue to play a crucial role in shaping the maritime industry and pave the way for future generations of women at sea to be empowered and enjoy greater gender equality.