From deck to desk: Women and the future of shipping

As we mark the IMO's International Day for Women in Maritime, this article is both personal and professional: tracing a childhood spent at sea, a career shaped by absence, and a mission born from the question: 'What if I had seen her?' As the maritime world faces rapid change and critical talent shortages, it is time to confront enduring stereotypes.

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Admiral Nelson, Captain Kidd, and James Cook are legendary British figures. Sir Francis Drake and Captain Blackbeard are also well known. What they have in common is that they are all men. Historically, the maritime industry has been a male-dominated field. Whether naval officers, merchant sailors, explorers or pirates, it has been men who have shaped the course of maritime Britain.

In the 21st century, women like Captain Kate McCue, Captain Belenda Bennet, and Captain Radhika Menon are making history in the maritime world. They are breaking barriers—McCue as the first woman to captain a mega cruise ship, Bennet as a merchant navy medal winner, and Menon as the first woman to receive the IMO Award for exceptional bravery at sea. Despite such successes, today's seafarer is stereotypically male. It is time to challenge the stereotype.

My personal journey

The reason I am keen to explore this stereotype is because it has had an impact on my life. My father was a Captain in the Merchant Navy. He started sailing when he was sixteen. The youngest of five boys and a bright student, he failed to get the requisite grades for university and was therefore sent to sea. Though he initially struggled with the rigours of chipping and painting on board, he spent his entire life in the industry. His wife, my mother, joined him on board soon after marriage, and as soon as babies were allowed to leave land, at six months old, I too sailed with them.

I spent the first five years of my life on board merchant navy vessels—bulk carriers—coming ashore only for holidays. I played on the decks, with the young cadets as my nannies and companions, and the hatches and engine room as my playground. The carpenter on board made me a dollhouse to order and the chef cooked my meals.

That was the only reality I knew, and the only house I lived in with any consistency. Shore leave were the breaks from our life at sea. I spent half a decade on the seas, stopping at dozens of countries, watching goods (mostly grain) being loaded and unloaded. The only formal education I had in those years was a few weeks of playschool between family visits when my father was on leave. I was five when my first brother was born, and six when my second brother arrived. The growing family prompted my father to take a shore job. He moved the family on land, working for the same company ashore, as many did and still do. At six, having grown up at sea, I didn't know the alphabet or how to count, though I could tell you all about the gangway, the engine room, holds, and bunkers. School was a shock, and I was kept back to be brought up to the standard of other children my age. But I didn't care. I knew I was going to be a sailor when I grew up. My father was my hero. I could envision no other life for myself than that of a seafarer.

However, when I hit my teens and had to choose a career, I ended up choosing law. All my years growing up I had never seen a single female seafarer, and so, I guess I had internalised that as a woman I could not be one. I don't think this was ever explicitly said to me, but it was reinforced in my every interaction with people in the navy and merchant navy. And I met a lot of them; all my cousins had followed in my father's footsteps to become "shippies". My brother also ended up sailing for an oil major.

I decided that if I couldn't join shipping as a seafarer, I would join the industry from another angle—as a maritime lawyer. I read for a master's in maritime law and thereafter an executive MBA in maritime and now I work in the field of maritime insurance. I work at Gard advising shipowners, traders and charterers on their contracts, disputes, and other legal issues. I love what I do, and I am delighted to be an integral part of the maritime community. I am also President of Women's International Shipping and Trading Association UK (WISTA UK). In this community, I see women around my age—and women younger than me—who went to sea, are at sea, and are planning to be at sea. I wish I had seen them when I was younger.

And so, I have made it my mission to ensure women in this career have visibility so that no other young woman fail to follow her dreams due to a lack of role models.

Shipping today and tomorrow

Shipping is the engine of global trade, carrying over 90 percent of world goods. Our global lifestyle depends on shipping, and therefore also on seafarers. For maritime trade to be safe, secure, and environmentally sound we need sufficient quality entrants. However, unfortunately, we are seeing a fall in the number of seafarers. Drewry's Manning Annual Review and Forecast reveals that officer availability deficit is on the rise, and the International Chamber of Shipping /BIMCO study prophecies that we will be about 96,000 seafarers short by 2026. International Recruitments need to be a priority, and targeting 50 percent of the population that has been ignored for years could assist in reducing this shortage.

There have been some efforts to bring this topic into the conversation – for example, when the Director General of the Danish Maritime Authority stated at the Crew Connect Global Conference in Manila in November 2023 that he believes "diversity is better for safety, retention and a variety of factors". Still, the industry seems to be stuck on the question, "We have to find out what to do." It is time for the conversation to shift towards action. By using diversity toolkits, such as the ICS Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit , the maritime sector can move toward genuine inclusivity—efficiently and effectively.

The current facts and figures regarding women seafarers are not very encouraging. As of today, women make up a mere two percent of the global maritime workforce. While this figure has been gradually increasing over the past decade, it is nowhere near representative of the population. In the UK, the percentage of women seafarers is slightly higher than the global average, with around four percent of seafarers (certified officers) being female. Uncertified officers have a higher representation at about 34 percent and ratings at 27 percent. We are seeing a growth but there are also indications of a "glass ceiling" putting a damper on promotion and retention.

When I spoke to female seafarers who came ashore, they all spoke about hitting a glass ceiling. They could progress to a certain point after which organisational structures, lack of opportunities and lack of mentorship gave them no option but to come ashore.

A single parent mentioned the sense of abandonment she felt when there was no support for her through her pregnancy, neither from the company she had sailed with as her contract was over, nor ashore as seafarers were not given benefits on land. She had no option but to look for an alternate career. These examples do not bode well in encouraging women to pursue a career at sea, despite more women from India, Turkey, and the Philippines entering the field and normalising the image of the 'female seafarer'.

Traditionally, women are better represented in onshore support roles, such as shipping management, maritime law, and port operations – but even here, progress has been slow. Only recently have we begun to see more female partners in shipping law firms, in the higher echelons of marine finance, and in ship broking and insurance. Of course, society is changing and access to education and training opportunities has become more equitable, allowing women to gain the necessary skills and certifications required for seafaring and seafaring adjacent careers. Maritime institutions and academies have implemented initiatives to encourage female enrolment and participation in maritime courses. WISTA UK is leading fundraising for female seafarers together with the Maritime Education Fund, the Merchant Navy Training Board, and the Maritime London Officer Cadet Scholarship.

If any woman wishes to pursue a career at sea in the UK and possesses the necessary skills and mindset, access to funding will not be a barrier for her. The challenge is rather to find these women, to excite them to join the profession, to make seafaring visible and accessible and even glamorous. This is where we need to focus, and we need to start young, advocating the importance and excitement of the maritime industry, to children in schools, and in educational establishments at all ages. As an island nation, shipping should be the first career of choice, and we should encourage our brightest and best to join us in the industry.