



The Gender Empowerment and Multi-cultural Crew
(GEM) Project Summary, 2015 – 2016
For the ITF Seafarers' Trust

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PREFACE

The Gender, Empowerment and Multi-cultural Crew (GEM) research project was sponsored by the ITF Seafarers' Trust and began July 2015. The project was officially launched at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in September 2015 and was initiated to examine seafarers' welfare, focusing on gender issues within the multi-cultural crew environment. The key aim of the research was to extend limited knowledge surrounding these areas and to ultimately help create a safer working environment for all seafarers, in particular women and ethnic minorities, and encourage their participation and retention within the industry. This ambitious project is the first of its kind to examine seafarers' welfare and gender issues in three uniquely different maritime nations including the UK, China and Nigeria, drawing from the experiences of both men and women seafarers.

Following a literature review, data was gathered from cadets before and after their first sea time. Unique access to information from Southampton Solent University's (SSU) Warsash Maritime Academy (WMA), Shanghai Maritime University, China and Nigeria's National Maritime Academy made this possible. Interviews were also conducted across the three research countries with maritime stakeholders including policy makers, recruiters, maritime educators, NGOs and agencies, shipping companies and female seafarers (current and former). These helped to highlight good and poor practice and identify welfare issues that currently prevent women from continuing with their training, leaving the industry early or not entering it at all. Finally, themed panel discussions with a broad range of maritime stakeholders took place at the GEM conference, allowing further discussion and development of the research findings. The subsequent phases of the project included extensive thematic data analysis, and dissemination of the research findings to those who have the greatest potential to bring about change within the industry.

The GEM research has generated a keen interest from all over the world, and has demonstrated an appetite to bring about cultural change within the industry to empower, attract and to retain more women in maritime careers. The research has identified gaps in current knowledge and has gone some way to addressing these, improving understanding and raising awareness of the broader issues surrounding multicultural crews, so that women seafarers can be supported in addressing those issues and in playing a fuller role on board ships and within the wider maritime industry. Some very specific differences were identified between nationalities; differences which primarily originate from cultural and traditional values, economic status and political ideologies. The findings also show that despite greater awareness, increased discussion and new initiatives on gender issues in maritime, there is still a long way to go in order to achieve a better gender balance and equality among minorities at sea.

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Shipping awareness

Attracting more women into the industry is seen as the initial step in a long chain of cultural and behavioural changes required in order to create gender equality within the shipping industry. Raising awareness about merchant maritime business, particularly to young people at school age, was considered a vital first step in encouraging more women (and men) to enter the industry. This was emphasised in all of the countries where research was conducted, and is also noted to be a global issue. Lack of public awareness of the shipping industry needs to be addressed at the country level as well as industry-wide.

Women as a minority

Women make up a very small global minority of the shipping industry, both on the shore side and particularly at sea. Only 2% of the global seafaring workforce is made up of women, with the majority of those working in the passenger sector (cruise and ferries). In countries such as Nigeria this could be attributed to women finding it particularly difficult to gain sea-time experience. Currently in China, no women are recruited on board following their training. Shipping companies can be unwilling to take women on, sometimes due to financial reasons such as having to adapt to gender-specific accommodation but sometimes because shipping companies are aware of the potential issues associated with mixing women and men on board and their reluctance to take those on. However, some shipping companies want to increase the number of women that work for them and this can be seen as an important step to improving their corporate social responsibility and inclusion policies.

Being in the minority, the onus is on women seafarers to check their own behaviour and develop awareness of how they come across in the company of men and particularly when working within a multi-cultural crew environment. Sometime this can lead to increased social isolation on board due to a reluctance to stand out or a desire to avoid unwanted attention.

The research highlighted many incidences of abuse and discrimination at sea. The insidious nature of discrimination and harassment needs to be addressed and simply not tolerated on board. The research shows that the responsibility lies with shipping companies and senior officers to establish the right on-board environment – one which will make women and other minorities feel safe and valued whoever they are.

Age and rank

Despite some significant progress being made by some shipping companies and senior officers to address issues of sexual harassment, abuse and bullying, the research findings across all 3 countries have identified these as the key issues that women seafarers will face. These forms of abuse have associations with the ship's hierarchical structure, with abuse tending to occur mainly within the lower ranks and younger age demographic. Although not the key focus of the research, some interviewees pointed out that these problems are not unique to women seafarers, but also to some vulnerable men and ethnic minorities on board.

Training and mentoring

Training at all levels was considered vital and the role of mentoring was discussed widely. Some shipping companies and the ship's senior officers want to instil a good, safe working environment on their vessel. Owners and senior officers have a duty of care to create a safe and inclusive culture for all their crew. In particular, the ship's Captain will receive reports about incidences, and needs to be adequately prepared to handle these. In cases relating to gender issues, some Captains may simply have less experience of having women on board. It is therefore important that senior officers, particularly the Captain, are equipped with the correct knowledge and skills to adequately address gender-related issues should they arise. At the same time, it is equally important that any incident on board is reported, and encouragement given for doing so. Immediate and appropriate action is required following the reporting of an incident, as this may be vital to the safety of an individual and will also demonstrate to the crew that the rules will be firmly enforced.

The GEM research has also questioned whether the industry is going far enough to prepare cadets for a seafaring life. Throughout the research, lack of training and mentoring were frequently mentioned as contributing to the issues surrounding gender and multi-cultural crews. However, training and mentoring were also highlighted as an important potential solution in providing support for cadets and young seafarers during their first phases of sea time. Although some shipping companies have mentoring on their vessels, many shipping companies operate without a formal mentoring scheme. Mentoring between new cadets and more experienced officers can be extremely valuable. This role should incorporate the transfer of knowledge and the provision of a 'listening ear' for the new recruits when issues arise at sea, which might be hard for them to deal with as less experienced sailors. In light of the research findings, where younger people with less experience tend to be treated with less respect than older, more experienced and higher ranked individuals, mentoring can offer a particularly good way of overcoming these issues. Knowing there is someone you can talk to and get advice from on board can make all the difference in combating isolation and vulnerability, improving safety (personal and operational) and potentially going some way to improving seafarers' retention rates.

Multi-national crews

It was evident from the cadet surveys, particularly the data collected after sea time, that most of the cadets did not think that the multi-cultural crew environment contributed to gender issues.. The issues raised tended to relate more to safety than gender discrimination: language barriers were mentioned, including being able to communicate effectively with people of other nationalities; social aspects were also highlighted, such as potential isolation of minority ethnic groups and certain nationalities forming cliques together and reverting to their own language. It was recognised that certain cultures will have different expectations and tolerances of certain behaviours and this may affect their outlook towards women on board. Cultural hierarchies and traditions (particularly in relation to women) were noted in this regard. Although cadets did highlight the different nationalities that they would prefer to sail with, it was acknowledged that everyone is different and should be treated as individuals. The interviews (which took place with more experienced maritime stakeholders) highlighted further gender-related issues concerned with multi-cultural crews, as well as the need for shipping companies to closely consider the on-board cultural mix in order to achieve the best working environment. Some interviews with shipping managers and recruiters indicated that this was something that does happen, and is vital in achieving optimum working conditions.

The shipping industry in ten years' time?

Some interesting thoughts were shared from the interviews and panel discussions on where the industry might be in ten years' time. These primarily concerned the developments in technologies and a shift in the global supply of seafarers. The industry will have to adapt to meet the challenges and needs of the ever-evolving market place and the people employed within it. The training needs of the workforce will also have to adapt at all levels and to develop new skill sets where they may be required. Discussions highlighted that this will involve much more in the way of inter-disciplinary training to meet new technological advances and keep up with the modern working environment in the maritime industry. The role of the modern seafarer may well require more skills that are traditionally associated with females (sometimes referred to as 'soft skills'). Ensuring the implementation and enforcement of current legislation is also paramount to making the industry a safer place to work.

Sea time

Nigeria and China culturally hold more traditional views about women being on board and women in Nigeria can find it especially difficult to get sea time. In China, obtaining sea time for women cadets is currently not possible due to the approaches of the shipping companies there, although significant political change is currently taking place. The UK presents fewer issues for cadet training, and once on the programme cadets tend to get sea time training regardless of whether they are male or female.

Summary of key recommendations

The GEM reports for Nigeria and China have proposed recommendations that are relevant to the unique cultural and political environment of that particular country, although as noted, the UK recommendations are of a more generic nature and could be applied globally. Therefore, the following recommendations are those selected from the research findings that have a global relevance, and could be applied to the shipping community generally and implemented in countries around the world.

Industry awareness

The research has found that instilling an early awareness of the industry is vital for highlighting these careers as a viable career option for boys and girls, so that they can make the industry-appropriate choices with regards to exam subjects at school. This is especially relevant to girls, who are often less inclined to select STEM subjects (specifically maths and a science) that would help them to take up cadetships.

Training for senior officers

The research shows that the onus is on the shipping companies and senior officers to establish an environment on board that will help women and other minorities feel safe and valued. Investment in leadership development for senior management should be provided in order to deal with the modern welfare challenges on board. It is recommended then that ships' Captains and other senior officers are provided with, and have on-going access to, training to help them to adequately respond

to any gender-related issues that may arise at sea, particularly where they may not often be sailing with women. There needs to be a move away from the culture of ‘what happens at sea, stays at sea.’

Mentoring

The need to better prepare cadets for their sea time was a key issue raised by the research. This included specific training to manage expectations relating to gender, and the multicultural crew environment which the majority of seafarers will work in. The idea of mentoring cadets (male and female) in an official capacity was valued by the interviewees and panel members who discussed this. Mentoring was seen as one way of helping to support cadets and ameliorate some of the potential difficulties they may face during their first voyages at sea. It is therefore recommended that the industry should be encouraged to adopt and facilitate mentoring as part of its on board culture.

HELM and adequately preparing women and men for sea

There is a need for the industry to co-ordinate efforts and find a balance between adequately preparing women for sea and deterring them with ‘bad news’ stories. Equipping women with the right knowledge to be able to deal with certain situations if they arise is important. They need to be aware of their rights and who to report to if a situation arises. HELM courses and similar training go some way to raising awareness of gender and multi-cultural crew issues, but it is recommended that they are examined further to ensure that seafarers are adequately prepared for their time at sea and that specific issues of gender and cultural diversity are being addressed. Input from cadets returning from their sea time would make a valuable contribution in this area.

Sea time for women

It is vital that sea time training is provided for all men and women training to be cadets. Helping them to find jobs following their cadetships also requires shipping companies to re-think their current strategies for employing women. This is of particular concern in China, where currently no women are newly recruited on board vessels, and also in Nigeria, where sea time is often very difficult for women cadets to obtain.

Ethical recruitment

There should be a requirement for shipping companies and owners to ensure that appropriate recruitment is taking place, particularly concerning the placement of cadets and the mix of nationalities on-board. Although it is important that the ratio of women to men on board is generally increased, the recruitment of women should not become a tick-box exercise to fulfil inclusion policies. Although the research has demonstrated that there are incidences of this happening, it does not appear to be the norm. However it is important for shipping companies to be constantly trying to improve their social inclusion policies whilst maintaining the balance of recruiting for quality and skills, whether the candidate is male or female. Ethical recruitment and investment in employees is an essential part of enabling the best working environment to be achieved at sea.

Women's networks and support groups

The community of female seafarers is very small and they don't tend to have many forums with which to connect to one and other. In a heavily male-dominated industry such as maritime, women are likely to remain a minority, even if numbers do significantly increase. Support groups and networks aimed at women in the maritime industry, such as the global operation Women in Shipping and Trade Associations (WISTA), can provide valuable support and female company when in port in another country, or through the events that are regularly run on a national and regional level. IMO's new Programme on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector (IWMS) is also doing good work to encourage *'IMO Member States to open the doors of their maritime institutes to enable women to train alongside men and so acquire the high-level of competence that the maritime industry demands.'* (IMO, 2016). These initiatives should be further supported and encouraged more by the industry and highlighted to the groups that are most likely to benefit from them.

Sharing and highlighting best practice

The research suggests that some shipping companies have conducted much work in trying to provide a safe working environment on board, and try hard to maintain a culture of tolerance and diversity. Despite their efforts, however, some companies do not succeed at this. In trying to move the industry forward, dialog between shipping companies on the potential gender and multi-cultural issues they are encountering, and the measures taken to resolve them, could promote a better way of working – particularly with the sharing of best practices. To some extent, irrespective of the vessel type seafarers are sailing on, the welfare issues will often be similar. Therefore a forum to discuss and share best practice amongst shipping companies could help improve their working practice. However, with more transparency in the organisational culture and ethical standpoints, this is an area that needs to be addressed with modern values.

Legislation

Going forward, the industry needs to look closely at how maritime legislation (particularly the relatively recent Marine Labour Convention (MLC)) is applied in the future, with a view to addressing potential barriers to enforcing this. The industry needs to consider whether current legislation goes far enough and how best to support the implementation of it.

Areas for further research

- Study of best practice of mentoring programmes which could be applied on board (this may involve learning from other industries).
- Investigation of the training requirements for cadets before sea time, to ensure they are appropriately equipped to work in a multi-cultural crew environment and to deal with gender related issues (both for men and women).
- Ongoing study to monitor the effectiveness of the MLC in relation to gender issues. How can its implementation be most beneficial and does it go far enough to address the key concerns?

Finally

The research has highlighted an appetite for cultural change within the industry to help make it a safer and non-threatening environment, particularly for women to work in. The challenges of the modern maritime work place demonstrates the need to re-think training at all levels to help instil an inclusive work environment that does not tolerate any forms of abuse. This has highlighted the importance of mentoring for new seafarers, who will be the future ambassadors of the industry. The industry and governments need to convince young people to seek a career in the maritime sector, by providing an environment free from harassment and discrimination. As one of the GEM Conference panel members said, there needs to be *'...recognition that a ship is not just a unit of productivity. A ship is a social system.'*

We hope that the findings from the GEM project will provide further impetus for the cultural change that is required within the industry to bring about gender and ethnic equality, and equip the decision makers with the information to act on this. The maritime industry needs all sectors to work together to meet the challenges it faces. As another panel member from the GEM Conference said: *'Translating that into action requires bold and forward-thinking administrations, and women to break that century old socio-cultural pattern.'*

For further information about the GEM project and to download this report, please visit, www.solent.ac.uk/GEM

[Information about the ITF Seafarers' Trust can be found on this link.](#)

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