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An Examination of the Pivotal Role of Female Seafarers and the Underlying Challenges

Abstract

Female seafarers are a set of women that work inside the vessel or any type of maritime transport under fluctuating weather conditions over a period of time with the sole aim of ensuring a seamless transportation of oil, chemicals, containers, passengers, cargoes and other types of freight from origin to destination. Even though the safety and security of women at sea is not guaranteed, it has not in any way dissuaded these calibre of women from pursuing this career path. This job description is quite rigorous and this study categorises the work of the female seafarer into operational, navigational, health safety, communication and leadership duties. Any interruption in any of these duties will have severe financial implications. The pivotal role of female seafarers is to boost international trade. Hence both female and male seafarers are drivers of international trade. There are several reasons why a woman will embrace this job in spite of the inherent challenges as this study indicates. One of the several reasons that the respondents indicated was to increase the number of female seafarer from 1.2%. The focus of this research is to examine the pivotal role of women at sea to the global economy and the underlying challenges. A structured questionnaire is developed and sent to a set of 50 female seafarer. Hence, this research contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of women at sea, and what can be done to motivate them to continue with this herculean tasks of contributing to the global economy

Keywords: female seafarers, maritime transport, global, economy, pivotal

1. Short Guide into Paper Structure

1.1. Summary

This research is a concise examination of the pivotal role of sea farers to the global economy. An electronic survey was developed and sent to 50 female sea farers. However, due to the nature of the jobs of these women, with several of them being at sea and network issues also prevalent, only 21 females could respond to the survey. The respondents were from various nations, such as, Angola, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. These female sea farers work with various types of vessels such as container vessels, cruise ship, tug boats, cargo vessels, oil tankers, chemical tankers etc. The study showed that one of the reasons that motivates these women to be a seafarer is that they have a passion for sea and want to contribute economically to their nations. However only 66.7% of the respondents have worked as a sea farer for a period of one to five years. The challenges that these female seafarers encounter are also categorised into emotional, physical and various forms of gender discrimination. These challenges are discussed in this study. In conclusion, this research recommends stakeholder engagement between the ports, female seafarer and shipping company, in order to ensure continuity of this profession and retention of female sea farer.

2.1. Introduction

Globally and especially in Africa, the female gender has a societally acceptable role of being a daughter, sister, wife, mother and grandmother, available at home. In this new era, there is a shift in the mind-set as there are females that are passionate about being at sea and want to contribute their own quota to building of nations and economic development. However, since the overall percentage of women in maritime still remains at 2%, [1], there is need to identify the various challenging factors. Identification usually leads to a solution that will ensure that female seafarers are encouraged to continue to work in the maritime domain so that the percentage of women in maritime will increase.

Firstly, the objective of this research is to identify women whose job description is to labour operationally on any type of vessel at sea. Secondly, this study examines the critical role of female sea farers and the motivating factor that enables them to leave the safety and security of their respective homes and nations and journey into the sea. The challenges these female sea farers encounter is discussed and recommendation is proffered to ensure continuity of this service. This study examines sea farers from various coastal nations such as: Angola, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.

Maritime transport is pivotal to international trade because over 90% of international trade is done via sea [2]. The world basically survives on international trade. The shipping vessels and man power are a critical component of international

trade. In 2020, 10.7 billion cargo tons of cargo was moved by sea [2]. The importance of maritime trade to international trade will continue to increase as maritime trade is expected to grow 2.4% in 2023 and more than 2% between 2024 and 2028 [3]. Significantly, international trade contributes to economic sustainability[4]. Seafarers are driving force of international trade. The implication of this is that both male and female seafarers have a pivotal role in both in the global and national economy.

Globally, the total number of seafarers serving on internationally trading merchant ships is estimated at 1,892,720 seafarers, of which 857,540 are officers and 1,035,180 are ratings [5]. However, with the anticipated growth in world merchant fleet, in the next ten years, the demand for seafarers, will continue to exceed the supply of seafaring officers [5]. The Covid-19 pandemic also had tremendous impact on the number of sea farers. Hence, there is still a short fall in man power especially in the number of female sea farers. There is a lack of seafarers, especially experienced officers [6]. The Seafarer workforce report also accentuates this position by stating that 1.2% percent of the global seafarer workforce are women[7]. The report also estimates that there are 24,059 women serving as seafarers, which is a 45.8% increase compared with the 2015 report.[7][8]

A female seafarer is a woman, whose job description is to work on different types of vessels at sea. The vessel types includes: oil tankers, bulk carriers, general cargo ships, container ships, liquified gas, chemical tankers, ferries and passenger ships. The role of a female sea farer varies from being a ship captain, ship cook, cadet, deck officer engine officer, marine engineer to a tug master etc. Nevertheless, the female sea farer serves as a life line to international trade as she ensures the seamless movement of vessels from origin to destination. This study focuses on female sea farers that have devoted their lives to being at sea for weeks, months or even years. The subsequent sections will examine the research methods; research results, discussion and conclusion and recommendations.

2.2. Research methods

An electronic survey was developed and shared on various international maritime social media platforms. 21 female respondents completed the survey and provided tangible responses that indicated the various roles and challenges of a female seafarer. The responses of the sea farers were analysed thematically and the results presented.

2.3. Results and Discussions

This section provides a detailed overview of the roles and challenges of the female seafarer.

2.3.1. Profile of respondents

The respondents were youthful females who mentioned their love of the sea and the desire for adventure. In terms of the age range, 66.7% of the total respondents were between the ages of 30-40 years. 28.6% of the respondents were between the ages of 20-30 years and only 1% was between age 40-50 years. This shows that age is a determining factor for this type of work. There is so much rigour a youth can forbear because of the boundless energy.

In terms of marital status, 81% of the respondents are single whilst only 19% are married. 85.7% of the respondents had no biological children whilst only 14.3% of the respondents had children. The marital and maternal status of the seafarers point to the issue of family ties. The calibre of the respondents can be categorised as females at the prime of their lives. All the respondents had formal education that ranged from diploma to first degree and even to masters degree.

2.3.2. The Pivotal roles of the sea farers

Seafarers are the propelling force for international trade. Both female and male seafarers contribute to trade facilitation, creation of job and the economic development of nations [ICS and IIA, 2023]. Actually, international trade can not exist without both male and female sea farers because vessels can not traverse the seas and oceans without man-power. 38.1% of the sea farers works on tug boats, 33.3% of the sea farers work on cargo vessel; while 14.3% of the respondents work on cruise ship. 9.5% of the respondents indicated that they work on container vessels while 4.8% of the respondents work on oil tanker vessels. Irrespective of the vessel, the duties of the female seafarer are categorised into operational, navigational, technical, health and safety duties, communication and leadership duties. This is outlined in Table 1. These duties are critical to the seamless flow of transiting the cargo, container, passengers, oil and gas from origin to destinations. Any disruption in these duties could cause a delay in the maritime supply chain which will result in huge monetary implication.

Table 1: The Pivotal Role of Female Sea Farer [Ref: Osundiran Field work,2023]

Operational Duties	Navigational/ Technical Duties	Health and Safety Duties	Communication Duties	Leadership Duties
Maintenance of Boilers, Purifiers and Pumps.	Passage planning.	Crew management	Receiving and sending messages via VHF radio.	Work with the ship captain for daily operations of the vessel.
Maintenance of safety equipment on board.	Bridge watch.	Safety Issues.		Training.
Routine checks and Maintenance of engines.	Cargo watch.	Compliance to all policies.		Vessel Command.
Running machineries and servicing of auxilliary generator.		Monitoring of fresh water quantity consumed and remaining on board.		In charge of the tug boat.
Responsible for oil compressor maintenance.		Cleaning.		Checking that all machineries are working and in good order.

In spite of these tedious roles, 76.2% of the respondents indicated that they will not quit their jobs as a sea farer.

2.3.3. Retention of Female Sea Farers- Motivation and Challenges of Female Seafarers

According to the study conducted by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and Women in International Shipping and Trading Association (WISTA)[10] the percentage of women in the maritime domain still remains at 2%, 40 years later. This has to do with both the motivating factor and the ability for the women to overcome the hurdles and the challenges. The combination of both overcoming and motivation will cause increase in female seafarer retention.

Indeed, the retention of females in the seafaring space is a function of how they have been able to cope and combat the various challenges encountered. Retention can be measured in terms of the number of years the women have spent in the maritime space. The study showed that majority of the respondents which makes up 38.1% of the respondent had worked as a sea farer for between one to five years. 28.6% of the respondents have worked for less than one year as a sea farer. While 14.3% of the respondents have worked between eleven and fifteen years as a sea farer. Even though 85.7% of the respondent are motivated to be a seafarer because of their passion for the sea, the challenges might outweigh the passion cause the seafarer to have a rethink.

Cultural differences, communication and language barriers that emanates from working on foreign vessels are part of the challenges that female sea farers encounter [11]. 61.9% of the respondents attributed work related stress and mood swings as an emotional challenge. Emotional issues such as fear, depression, anxiety were common among the respondents. Considering the long hours of work put on working on deck, 66.7% of the respondents agreed that fatigue, tiredness and physical exhaustion were part of the physical challenges they have to contend with. 42.9% of the respondents touched on issues relating to gender discrimination whilst 9.5% of the respondent indicated sexual abuse. Only one of the respondent indicated exploitaiton as a challenge. These challenges are categorised in Table 2 into Emotional, Physical and Gender Discrimination. With regards to issue of gender based discrimination, 66.7% of the respondent indicated that they experienced one form of gender based discrimination or the other.

Table 2: Challenges that Female SeaFarer Encounter Ref: [Osundiran Fieldwork, 2023]

Emotional	Physical	Forms and instances of Gender based Discrimination	Miscellaneous
Work related stress.	Hunger.	Being put aside to solve a problem because of gender.	Poor Network.
Anxiety.	Long hours of Work.	Being treated as not among the team.	Inability to communicate with family and friends.
Fear.	Fatigue and Tiredness.	Being treated as being not capable.	Lack of family support.
Depression.	Isolation.	During the recruitment process.	Size of vessel and risk of sharing cabin with opposite seks,
Mood Swings.	Occupational related injuries.	Even after many years of working as part of the team, there is still issues of acceptance among team members.	Language differences.
Home sick	Sexual Abuse	When there is a major maintenance problem/ issue, the female seafarer is the last to be called.	No female supplies on bord.
	Sea sickness	While training at sea on a container vessel, the female seafarer was told, "you should be at home making babies".	Disposing of sanitary towels during menstrual cycle.
			Unable to communicate with family and friends over a long period of time

Table 2 provides an overview of the various challenges that the female seafarer encountered. The female seafarer have within themselves come up with coping mechanism, which includes sharing their concerns with fellow colleagues. 81% of the respondents get relieved emotionally and physically by talking to others even if it

means seeking for counselling. 76.2% of the respondents engage in a spiritual activity of praying which also helps them to cope well. 19% of the respondents are seeking for job elsewhere. Nevertheless, 76.2% of the respondents mentioned that they are coping by adapting to the life at sea.

The respondents also mentioned that the shipping companies and the ports do have a role in their being motivated to retain and maintain the seafaring roles and responsibilities. Shipping companies can provide enabling environment through policies that will train, develop and promote female seafarers. Ports can provide facilities that caters for the peculiar needs of the female seafarer. The respondents mentioned the issue of safety and security when the vessels have berthed at the ports.

3. Conclusions

21 female seafarer from various nations such as Angola, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa participated in this survey. Acknowledging that the circumstances that surrounds women working at sea might not be an easy match for the woman, nevertheless, only 23.8% of the respondents mentioned that they might quit their seafaring jobs because of family reasons.

The percentage of women in maritime is still 2% [1]. Future outlook indicates that the industry and relevant stakeholders should not expect there to be an abundant supply of qualified and competent seafarers without concerted efforts and measures to address key manpower issues, through promotion of careers at sea, enhancement of maritime education and training worldwide, addressing the retention of seafarers [5].

This research recommends the creation stakeholder engagement platforms between the Ports, female seafarer and the Shipping company, that will facilitate and promote the continuity and retention of female sea farer.

4. Appendices

An Examination of the Pivotal Role of Seafarers to the Economy and the underlying challenges. The Survey Link https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd4oR87RYXKqg0Lkk07xSa2RQ8EQphAppX17cEVme_hkZXrRw/viewform?usp=sf_link

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