

very few made a career at sea afterwards because of difficulties getting their sea time. In 2003, three students, one a female, started higher level courses in the School of Maritime Training with the NZ Maritime School. On conclusion of these courses the young woman could not get “sea time”. The request to the captain of local vessels for training the female student, met with negative response. This was despite support from parents and families. These perceptions, which were largely based on fear, should change. Safety issues were an international issue, and were the same for men and women. Following the presentations discussion was on the following issues: accessibility of maritime training for women, employment in the maritime sector for women, access to decision makers, advocacy systems to assist in the maritime sector. The groups then came up with resolutions to be presented at the next IMO Council meeting.

One of the main outcomes of the meeting was the request for the SPC Regional Maritime Programme to assist in setting up a Pacific Islands Maritime Women’s Association.



Women now work alongside men in ships.



Women performing practice sutures for their advanced first aid at sea training.

Women in the maritime industry¹

LCDR Janine Narbutas

Whilst my experience is from a Navy perspective, there are a lot of issues common to both the civil and defence maritime environments. I’ll be sharing some of my own experiences, especially the time spent at sea and I will also discuss some rather general aspects of the employment of women in the maritime industry.

Historically, the maritime industry has not been an attractive career path for women. It was one of the most male dominated careers that you could find. In the past, jobs in maritime involved a good deal of physical strength and culture prohibited women from participating at the operational level. The biggest issue of all was that of social acceptability. It was not acceptable 30 or 40 years ago for women to serve alongside men in such an isolated environment. There were also some very persuasive

folk tales like “having a woman on a ship would bring bad luck”. It is not surprising that there are no historical role models for women in maritime roles in a professional capacity.

Technology has changed the boundaries of our lives and what used to be limitations are now mere challenges. Women have a lot more freedom with access to areas that were previously prohibited but the introduction of women into this very traditional environment has been a slow and sometimes difficult process.

I joined the Navy in the early 1980s when women officers and sailors were still recruited largely for administrative duties. The complaint we had at the time was related to our training programme. It didn’t take all that long to learn administration special-

1. From a lunchtime presentation to the Samoa Association of Women Graduates, October, 2003, during the IMO Regional Seminar for the Pacific.

ist skills but our male counterparts had a whole raft of courses and skills they needed to develop so women could not be let loose on their first postings ahead of their male counterparts. The trainers at the time made the 8 females in the class do all the same training as the males. This included seamanship, weapons training, coastal and astronomical navigation and cruise training. The only difference was that the women would not follow up their theoretical training with practical consolidation and seetime. A few years after much complaining, the senior poster at the time called up asking for a female volunteer to be posted at sea. This came at a time when the women were all happily entrenched in their administration jobs, had social lives, fiancés or boyfriends and were generally living a fairly normal existence for a young twenty something female.

The ships that were open to women were the non-combatants – these were the transport or auxiliary type ships. In 1986 I took up a trainee position on the hydrographic survey ship *HMAS COOK*. It was a very comfortable ship with nice open passages, good bathrooms and cabins and plenty of room because it was built along civilian rather than military lines. At the same time, a female electrical engineer was posted to the *Cook* and we became the first billeted officers to undertake a sea posting — guinea pigs!

My first commanding officer was a very mature, professional man with lots of sea experience who clearly remembered his days as a trainee officer of the watch. It was his task to prove that posting women to sea was not a mistake. He certainly was not going to be accused of giving a girl a ticket who didn't deserve one. He made what I was in for quite clear and stressed that I would be well qualified by the end of my posting. After 18 months at sea, I was a better person and quite a good ship driver. In the course of my training, I lost my leave about 8 times for not getting the wardroom newspapers delivered on time, for leaving the harbour lights on 1 minute after sunrise, for being three cents down in the wardroom accounts – all good junior officer stuff. I think I reduced more morning and evening stars with a sextant than any other trainee at the time. But in the end, my engineering counterpart and I succeeded in getting our competency certificates and achieved what I guess was the ultimate aim at the time – to set a precedent.

In the meantime, the defence force was grappling with the issue of rising attrition rates and poor recruitment. On those grounds and with the help of the introduction of national equal employment opportunity legislation, the combatant and non-combatant issue was finally being debated. In the early nineties, legislation was changed and women

were allowed to be engaged in combat related roles. That meant that women were now allowed access to almost all positions on warships. Before this new policy could be implemented, there were some quite serious issues to be dealt with:

- There was the whole question of domestic arrangements.
- Security and safety were also thrown up as serious concerns.
- Some wives held protest rallies and formed action groups to object to their spouses being subjected to temptations whilst they were out at sea.
- Where were the females going to sleep and who was going to give them a shake when they were due to go on watch
- The “strength” issue was a big one with many suggesting that women couldn't do the heavy rope work.

Some of these issues were valid and needed some serious debate to resolve. Alternatives like “let's give them a whole ship” were discussed but thankfully never pursued. Suitability of accommodation was the most difficult issue and challenging impediment, so much so that only significant modifications in their subsequent refits could address this issue and dedicated female accommodation areas were built. The combined single-sex crews quarters were working very well and became the norm rather than the exception. A lot of the restrictions were limited to the sailors and NCOs because officers were accommodated in a different area of the ship and occupied single, double or quad cabins, depending on the size of the ship and the rank. The female officers could be accommodated much easier than the sailors and of course, their jobs were more brain than brawn. The argument of insufficient physical strength then became less of an issue. This remains true to this day. On patrol boats and landing craft, due to crewing accommodation, there is no scope for female sailors so the smaller ships are limited to employing only male officers.

Females are now employed in naval aviation wings, submarines or major warships as principal warfare officers, commanding officers of minor warships or executive officers of the frigates. Most of the male population accepted the fact and got on with the job albeit with some reluctance but some senior NCOs and officers could not entertain the thought or reality of women at sea. They would tell you quite proudly that one of the reasons they went to sea was to get away from women. With the introduction of women at sea were a whole raft of new policies and regulations to overcome the initial resistance and get everyone used to working in a different environment. There were policies ranging from the basic equal employment training,

good working relationship briefings, the instruction of two females at a time (whereby a woman could not serve at sea as the only female on board) and lots of other initiatives. These policies whilst necessary were restrictive – they presented very real management challenges.

Being a commanding officer at sea in the 21st century has brought with it some new and interesting management challenges and almost all of these challenges are mirrored in the civil environment. In the late 1980s, the International Maritime Organization recognised the need to increase the numbers of women in the global maritime profession and produced its first strategy paper on the subject. As two of its priority issues, this paper identified the need for providing access to training and employment for women. This paper also recognized the difficulties faced by women in the maritime sector, many of which were caused by stereotypes and outdated perceptions.

In the greater Asia Pacific region, this initiative has been successful in that the IMO has achieved its objective providing access to training. However, the training is not and will never be the big issue – the issue will be access to training bunks and then positions at sea for the practical consolidation of that training. Local women who choose a career in maritime cannot consolidate their training unless they go outside to the US, NZ, Australia or Asia. Unfortunately, this is

unlikely to change unless more women become interested in a career as mariners.

To overcome these difficulties, new policies need to be implemented, decisions about simple domestic modifications at the next refit or slipping need to be made and only vessels that can accommodate both men and women need to be purchased. Training programmes can be conducted to teach people what is expected in a shared work environment and how to implement practical employment guidelines.

Even though men have been traditional seafarers, the global maritime community will continue to be challenged to recruit academically qualified and suitable people. This is where countries with a strong maritime history will eventually leave their mark on the world. However the challenge is always going to be consolidation – whether it is for males or females. There are no shortcuts to sea experience. Attention needs to be paid right now to the implementation of policies that incorporate a more gender equitable maritime industry to address issues such as accommodation, ship design, policies and strategies and thereby minimize the angst that goes with any major change.

I don't think the maritime industry will ever be a leading employer of women but there is no reason why those who choose a career in the field should not be allowed to pursue their ambitions.

Female recruit and other trainees using the ship simulator at the Fiji School of Maritime Studies



Photo: Megan Streeter