

International Maritime Organization Regional Seminar for the Pacific: The role of women in the maritime sector — opportunities and challenges

Megan Streeter¹

Over 30 participants attended this regional seminar, which was held in Apia, Samoa from 8–10 October 2003. Honourable Faumuina Liuga (Minister for Works, Transport and Infrastructure, Samoa), who gave the keynote address, stressed the important role women play in the Pacific region and discussed opportunities for women in the maritime sector. Other presentations covered institutional perspectives and arrangements, personal experiences and examples from Samoa.

Presentations on institutional perspectives and arrangements were given by Ms Pamela Tansey (Technical Co-operation Division - IMO), Captain John Hogan (SPC's Regional Maritime Training Adviser), Ms Annaleise Caston (Senior Adviser – Policy and Enforcement, Environment Protection Standards - Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA)), Ms Twila Waqasokolala (Executive Secretary – Association of Pacific Ports) and Ms Louise Deehan-Owen (Lecturer – New Zealand Maritime School)

In her presentation, Ms Tansey highlighted that the integration of women into all levels of development had gained ground within the UN system over the past 20 years. In 1988, IMO published its first Strategy for the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector. This policy structure identified access to training and employment for women as two priority objectives. The Women in Development Programme was subsequently launched in 1989.

Ms Tansey also identified constraints facing women in the maritime sector and the difficulties of overcoming perceptions and stereotypes. She outlined IMO's global programmes to integrate women into mainstream activities, such as promoting the participation of women in maritime training, short term consultancies, regional seminars, fellowship programmes for women and in-house gender training.

Captain John Hogan presented a brief overview of regional approaches to gender issues in the Pacific and spoke of the work of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Council of Regional Organisations of the Pacific

(CROP). His presentation focused specifically on SPC's contribution and commitment to empowering Pacific Island women in general. He spoke of the involvement of Pacific Island women in the region's fisheries and the work of SPC's Coastal Fisheries Programme in managing community based projects on sustainable livelihoods for women in fisheries.

He stated that all of SPC's Regional Maritime Programme (RMP) activities were available to women and the participation of women was encouraged. At the same time he stressed that in the Pacific, gender differentiation seemed to be based on cultural gender roles and active participation of women in decision-making lagged far behind men.

Ms Annaleise Caston reiterated that the maritime sector was not necessarily limited to seagoing activities. She explained the work of AMSA and its broad responsibilities in maritime safety, aviation and marine search and rescue and the protection of the marine environment from ship sourced pollution. Ms Caston is a team member of the Environment Protection Standards section.

Ms Twila Waqasokolala presented a paper entitled "Cultural Barriers to the Participation and Employment of Women in the Maritime Sector in Fiji", where she discussed her role as the Executive Secretary to the Association of Pacific Ports.

Ms Waqasokolala said that in Fiji, Transport and Communication Sector, of which Maritime is a part only 17% of the workforce were women. She acknowledged, that practical considerations made some jobs in the sector more suitable for men, however operational functions in the ports were also always performed by men and women were only employed in administrative positions. She said that the classification of women who were in ports, as prostitutes, did not encourage women to seek employment in the maritime field!

She also acknowledged that there had been changes since the 1980s. The presence of women at the docks was becoming more commonplace because govern-

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ment agencies providing port services, employ women. The Customs Department, for example, employs 400 women, out of a total staff of 900 and 10% of these women are involved in clearance of vessels at ports. The Immigration, Port Health and Quarantine Departments have women Boarding Officers who carry out their work on vessels.

Ms Louise Deehan-Owen became a Fulltime Master in 1990. At that time, she became interested in crew training and developed safe ship management systems and vessel operating manuals for her company. She also spent two years working as vessel engineer. For her last three years in commercial shipping she trained and certified masters on the larger vessels and became a duty operations manager.

Ms Deehan-Owen began her career in maritime education by running the first course for young Maori people entering the maritime industry at the Mahurangi Technical Institute. She then became a lecturer at the New Zealand Maritime School. She has maintained a strong industry contact, often advising commercial operations on training and safety matters. She is also an executive of the Maritime and Seafood Educators' Association of Aotearoa.

Personal experiences were presented by Viti Whippy (President - Fiji Ship-owners' Association, President – Fiji Marine Board) and Captain Liz Datson (Pilot – Queensland Pilot Authority)

Mrs Whippy is a member of the Chartered Institute of Transport, representing the shipping fraternity. In June 2002 she was employed as a Manning Agent for C F Sharp who operate cable ships around the world. In August 2003 she was appointed President of the Fiji Marine Board.

Captain Liz Datson presented a personal perspective of her career at sea. She attributed her interest in the merchant navy to meeting her seagoing father's friends and being familiar with ships and the sea from a young age. During her cadetship, she was the only female employed in the industry. Despite the difficulties, she felt she was lucky to have found officers and crew on every ship who were willing to teach her so much. She believed that doing what she was asked to do, asking questions when she didn't understand, and her forthright nature got her through. Captain Datson completed a year at the Australian Maritime College (AMC) and achieved her Second Mate Foreign Going.

She was satisfied with her job and suffered little if no discrimination at all when performing her duties. She still encounters, however, strange looks as she

boards a vessel, generally because of cultural differences and the scarcity of female harbour pilots.

Samoa examples were presented by Mr Fagaloa Tufuga (Legal and Corporate Services Manager - Samoa Ports Authority), Ms Lalotoa Mulitalo (State Solicitor - Attorney General's Office, Samoa), Ms Kerryn Kwan (Principal Legal Officer - Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Samoa), and Dr Emma Kruse Vaai (Academic Director/Deputy CEO Samoa Polytechnic).

Mr Fagaloa Tufuga was a former student of the International Maritime Law Institute (IMLI). IMLI was established in 1988 in Malta under the auspices of IMO and offers developing countries unique facilities for postgraduate training in international maritime law and legislation.

To promote the integration of women from developing countries, 50% of the places on the course are reserved for qualified women candidates. However, during Mr Tufuga's year, there were eight women students out of a class of 24, and that was the highest female intake since its inception. Numbers of women students from the Pacific region are very low. The first director for IMLI was a woman named Professor Patricia Birnie, an expert, and arguably a world authority, on international environmental law. He conceded that there was a lack of human resources in maritime law and male domination of maritime affairs was a stereotype in this field.

Ms Lalotoa Mulitalo and Ms Kerryn Kwan presented a joint paper entitled "The Samoan perspective of women in the maritime (or professional) sector". Their address covered Samoan culture and Samoan women. A Samoan woman is referred to as "ioimata o le tuagane" ("the pupil of the eye") of the male members of family, but the importance was, however, limited to the confines home. They also highlighted the seafaring history of Samoans. They referred to factors such as lack of physical strength or the possibility of sexual assault as reasons for stopping women from a seagoing career. But increased mechanisation had made physique redundant and sexual assault was not limited to the female gender — homosexual assault was not an unknown concept at sea. They believed that the continued discrimination against women in this area was due to the difficulty Pacific Islanders have in changing their cultural perceptions.

Dr Emma Kruse Vaai stated that education, both formal and informal, was the key to success for a woman. Dr Vaai outlined the short history of Samoan women in the maritime programme at Samoa Polytechnic. Very few women enrolled and

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.



Photo: Peter Heathcote

Women now work alongside men in ships.



Photo: John Hogan

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.