



Understanding female seafarers who have passed through the port city of Durban

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Abstract

Women seafarers face a series of gender related challenges whilst working in a male dominated maritime environment. These challenges include stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, loneliness and occupational injuries. It is important to note that the list of challenges is extensive and cannot be fully explored in detail at this stage. A large number of the women engaged in the maritime sector are from poor developing countries with limited employment opportunities and minimal skills. Women find themselves simultaneously dealing with gender-based challenges while adjusting to a gender-biased job in the maritime sector. This paper will explore gender-based challenges and coping strategies adopted by women seafarers. The research will go on to describe the coping mechanisms that are employed to deal the challenges faced by women on board the ships. The data for this paper was collected via ten semi-structured interviews that were conducted in the Port City of Durban. Female seafarers who participated in the study were from Italy, Philippines, China, India, Africa and Korea. This paper explores the gender-based challenges and coping strategies employed by women in the maritime sector. A facebook page and social networking chat site were also used to recruit participants. Additionally an online survey was employed. The results of this study indicate that gender-based challenges such as inequitable working facilities, sexual harassment,

loneliness and isolation are significant challenges faced by women in the sector. While the maritime sector is beginning to address these issues, the process remains slow for women as they continue to cope in this harsh environment that makes little accommodation for them as a gender.

Keywords Women seafarers, gender-based challenges, coping strategies, Maritime Industry.

Introduction

Women seafarers who pursue employment on-board ships endure prolonged absences away from their partners, spouses and children in order to support them financially. According to Klein (2004) they are often forced to leave their children in the care of surrogate caregivers - mothers, grandmothers or close relatives, to make a living. The women in the sector from developing countries frequently find themselves in low paid, entry-level positions on board ships. These poor employment opportunities which they have accessed as a result of poor skills, alongside low levels of education forced them into gendered vocations in the maritime sector such as domestic or service work. Women seafarers can be found at all levels on board ships, but the majority of them are found performing cleaning duties, serving in the dining room, working in the galley and below deck (Chin, 2008:21). Seafarers on cruise and passenger ships are

often paid substandard wages and live under a system which does not guarantee work (2008:13). These seafarers arrive on ships for work, mostly from developing countries such as India, Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, Central America and the Caribbean (Chin, 2008) where limited employment opportunities often necessitate that individuals look beyond their country's borders for jobs. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) reports that below decks on virtually all cargo vessels, passenger and cruise ships, there is a hidden world of long hours, low pay, insecurity and exploitation (Prabhudas, 2004).

Research Methodology

The findings that are presented in this paper are drawn from qualitative interviews that were conducted over a six-month period; from August 2012 – January 2013. They were conducted with female seafarers whose age ranged from 20 to 45 years; all of whom were mothers. The women who participated in this study represent a wide range of nationalities, race, religions and cultures. The Southern African International Sailors Society (SAISS) were instrumental in helping the researchers gain access to the research participants. During the time periods that cruise-liners were arriving and departing from the port city of Durban, the researchers spent a considerable amount of time in locations frequented by women seafarers who had permission to leave the ships while stationed at the port. Researchers also used email to make contact with prospective participants and once permission had been granted, their experiences were carefully documented. A Facebook page was set up in November 2012 which allowed researchers to establish contact and engage in continuous communication with seafarers from across the globe. Women seafarers interested in participating in the research were able to indicate their willingness to be involved via different avenues. The data gathering technique involved 2 stages. The first stage involved using a semi-structured social networking chat site that allowed women to interact and share their experiences. The responses of the participants have either been used verbatim or where necessarily paraphrased in a manner that pre-

serves their original intent. Although all the original responses of the respondents were recorded in English, this was not always their mother tongue. The interviews lasted up to a period of three hours. Due to the nature of the participants' jobs and the short period of time in which they spend in port, follow-up interviews were not possible. Participants were gathered using the non-probability snowball sampling, where the first respondents recommended additional participants. This allowed us to overcome the difficulties of locating women seafarers who were willing to participate in a study of this nature. Babbie (1995:287) indicates: 'Snowballing sample is a technique that begins with a few relevant subjects that you've identified and expands the sample through referrals'. Davies (2007, 56) explains that the researcher has no control over who falls into the sample (size, race and gender) and consequently the researcher has no means of knowing; to what extent the information you retrieve or the opinions that are expressed do or do not reflect the total 'population' - or even what that 'population' might consist of. Cognisant of these limitations the research process began.

The Port at Durban then and now

The International Sailor's Society of Southern Africa (SAISS) has two branches located in Durban. One is located in Bayhead, Durban and the other is located in Umbilo road in Durban. The SAISS was established in the Port City of Durban in 1877 (SAISS, 2012). It is a place of refuge for seafarers visiting the Port (SAISS, 2012). It began when Marie Schultz, the wife of a local doctor took pity on the sailors who arrived at the port. She began to visit the sailors with books and supplies of tobacco to make them feel welcome when they arrived at the Port (SAISS, 2012).

The Durban Port was officially recognised with the appointment of the first Port Master in the 1940s (Ports&Ships, 2012). Since then the port has shown a substantial growth. A new port has only been recently approved, and will extend current services and be found, south of the current port (Ports&Ships, 2012). The current facilities off the port offer three hundred and two railway lines to transport goods

to-and-through the harbour, ship repair facilities, a dry dock, a privately owned floating dock, docking facilities for cruise ships and container facilities (Ports&Ships, 2012). The port also offers a single buoy mooring which caters for very large Crude Carriers (VLCC) that are too large to enter the port (Ports&Ships, 2012). These facilities require trained personnel to ensure that the port facilities run effectively. The port is the largest employer in KwaZulu-Natal (Ports&Ships, 2012). Few if any of the ships that dock at the port in Durban are registered in South Africa. Most are registered in foreign countries (Hutson, 2012). According to Ruggunan (2008: 288) there are very few South African registered ships. The vessel is said to be flying a Flag Of Convenience (FOC) (Sharda, 2012). The shortage of South African registered ships has led to the lack of interest in promoting seafaring as a career choice for young South Africans in addition to the lack of ships for seafarers to train on (Ruggunan, 2008:288).

Meet the Agent

It is not uncommon in the maritime sector for both men and women who secure employment on board cargo vessels, passenger ships and cruise ships to access employment through the use of recruitment agents in their respective countries, more so in developing countries. If they live in a coastal city, they are often tempted by the beauty and the glamour of the cruise liners; they are also lured into employment because of payment in US or European currencies. These currencies are valuable when converted into the local currencies of India, Asia, Eastern Europe, Central America and Africa. The employment agent plays an important role in the life of the seafarer, that person is often the one that 'forwards money to the workers family' if they secure employment on board a vessel. The use of an agent is a costly exercise, and workers are often in debt before they have even started working on board a ship. Paying off the debt can take a long time for seafarers. A cook employed on the ship gave a Bombay agency \$2000 US dollars which included his airfare to the assigned port. That sum was almost a third of the \$7000 he would make during

his 10-month contract on board the ship (Klein, 2002).

Vulnerable women and men from all over the world are manipulated into paying large sums of money before they start to earn on board the ships. The promise of earning in US dollars on board the world's finest cruise liners propels them into pay shipping agents a fee to secure employment. Life on board the ship is perceived to be rather glamorous prior to employment on board the ship. It is reported that an agency in Romania 'charges \$500 for an interview and an additional \$1000 to confirm employment' (Klein, 2002). Lloyds List reported that 'prospective ship-board employees were charged \$57 to receive and transmit their resume to potential employees' (Klein, 2002). International Labour Regulations require that the abovementioned fees are meant to be covered by the cruise liners and not potential employees. This is often overlooked and the seafarers cover these costs in order to secure employment (Klein, 2002).

This makes women seafarers reluctant to relinquish employment even in circumstances where they face harsh gender bias challenges, find it difficult to cope or suffer from home sickness. A combination of the financial responsibility they have to their families and the burden of their own work related debt owed to the seafaring agents adds to their increased stress levels.

Women Board the Ships

The approximate 25,000 women currently employed as seafarers (Thomas, 2004:309) are recruited from both developed and developing countries and their participation varies according to their region (Ruggunan, 2008). Female seafarers may find that they do not have equal access to facilities and equipment available to male workers on board the ships (Finke, 2012; ITF Seafarers, 2012f). This limited access can compromise their privacy, health, opportunities for advancement, abilities to communicate with family and leisure time. Natalia Prosdocimi made a conscious choice as a young girl to select a profession as a seafarer (ITF, 2005c). She is from Argentina and was faced with the challenges of entering a male

dominated sector. As the barriers of gender began to be dismantled globally her chance for a life at sea arrived (ITF, 2005c). *'To a large extent, we have to thank trade unions for this law, which gave women the right to graduate as deck or engine officers'*, says Natalia. Natalia was the only women in her class when she joined the naval school, a pioneer in her field (ITF, 2005c). Natalia graduated in 2004, and she was the first woman captain to be appointed in Argentina (ITF, 2005c). Success required determination and hard work. Natalia's superiors expected her to work harder than male seafarers (ITF, 2005c).

When I began to work, I experienced discrimination from some higher officials. Women need to make a double effort in order to be accepted. They are always being tested, and they work under greater pressure. These realities stop them taking on this career and may discourage them from staying in it.

Vanesa Soto had a similar experience when she stepped on board the *Global Mariner*. It was her first time on board a ship (ITF, 2005c). In July 1998, the *Global Mariner* sailed away from London, travelling through 86 ports in 51 countries on a trip around the world that lasted 20 months. In total, 750,000 visitors attended the exhibitions about life at sea. Vanesa was one of them (ITF, 2005c). This journey acted as a catalyst which prompted her to pursue a career at sea. She attended Naval School for three years and committed to a life and career at sea (ITF, 2005c). Both in the past and currently Vanesa continues to be an advocate for women on board ships (ITF, 2005c). She has witnessed two cases of women colleagues being sexually harassed at work. Presently, she is the only 1 female amongst 13 male colleagues and although she did experience numerous incidents in the early stages of her careers, she has now found a collegial safe and satisfactory work environment (ITF, 2005c).

Welcome to my World

While women continue to enter the seafaring profession largely at its lowest levels, their presence is becoming increasingly visible on cruise ships, cargo vessels and at ports around the world (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). In the 2000 SIRC/ILO survey conducted,

researchers found that only 6% of these women were employed on cargo ships, 68% of the women worked on ferries and the remaining 26% were employed on cruise liners (Anon, 2003). Chin (2008) believes that it is becoming common in a changing environment for an increasing number of women to be gainfully employed in the industry on cruise ships, passenger ships or ferries. There are gender specific problems that women seafarers experience on board, which are not shared by their male counter-parts. The extract below is from an interview with a female seafarer who works onboard a cruise liner that passed through the Port City of Durban in 2012/2013. It best describes the loneliness and isolation that female seafarers experience when they are separated from their children for extended periods of time. Their prolonged absence from home is one of the major contributing factors that results in a larger number of women not choosing to pursue a career at sea. (Singh, 2011).

I am lonely, depressed and isolated every day of my life when I am onboard the ship. I work to feed my mother and my daughter. I work so I can send my daughter to school. I have no job at home; the jobs that I can find at home do not pay enough for my family to survive. If I did not work on the ship, my family would starve to death. I stay up worrying about my 60-year-old mother and my 6-year-old daughter. What would happen to my child if my mom died? Who would take care of her? What would happen to them if I died? I cannot see any hope; I cannot see any change. (Female Seafarer no. 7 Interviewed, 20 November 2012)

Men Own the Sea

Women have always played an important role in the maritime industry. However large or small, their role was and continues to be important. In 1603 four German captains were women; WW11 saw women leading war ships into battle (Anon, 2003:7). By 1997 only one female chief officer was employed by BP Shipping, supposedly one of the most progressive companies in the UK (Couper, Walsh, Stanberry, & Boerne, 1999:21). Society reflects mainstream current trends in employment. The maritime industry currently reflects similar trends to share-based employment where specific professions are either male or

female dominated. Historically, the seafaring industry has been male dominated (Chin, 2008:21). The challenges that women face in addition to accessing employment on board ships, is accessing certain types of viable employment options. In some countries maritime institutions are not allowed to recruit women for their programmes (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). A review of early employment patterns reveals a low number of women seafarers both in the current and historical context. In the case of India, statistics in 1998 indicate that there were 43,000 seafarers registered. Of these seafarers, only 3 were women (Anon, 2003). In China, the largest shipping company stopped employing women on cargo ships; this was deemed unsuitable employment for women, even though they had previously been employed on cargo ships for extended periods of time (Chin, 2008:11). Today, the same company only employs 150 women and they are largely concentrated in the hospitality sector on cruise ships (Anon, 2003: 11). Women who complete navigation courses (ITF Seafarers, 2012f) also can face discrimination from prospective employers who are reluctant to employ women in what is perceived to be a male profession (Finke, 2012). What is also evident in this male dominated industry is that female seafarers receive lower rates of remuneration for equal work (Finke, 2012; ITF Seafarers, 2012f). Women's inclusion and exclusion in the maritime sector is often dictated by gender constructs, labour demand and low wages. These trends are similar to those seen in other traditionally male dominated sectors, where women are the first to be fired when unemployment levels are high and the last to be hired when employment opportunities are rife. A growing demand for seafarers is gradually leading to evolving employment patterns, which has created a space for women at all levels.

Welcome Back to the Female Seafarers

In China, the lack of suitable male candidates has altered recruitment policies. Since 2000, women have been actively targeted and encouraged to pursue maritime careers (Anon, 2003:13). Women's participation

in the industry is being actively encouraged by Maritime programmes both locally and internationally (DUT, 2012; Maritime-Executive, 2010; SAMTRA, 2013). Maritime and nautical school enrolments in 1998 indicate that for every 95 males registered at a maritime college 5 women are registered; in Germany 96 male students are registered compared to 4 female students; in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom the disjuncture between the sexes is no different (Anon, 2003:13). Despite these efforts and advances, few women are employed in senior positions on the deck and in the engine rooms (Couper et al., 1999:21).

The doors of the seafaring profession could have possibly swung wide open for women due to the current shortage of labour at sea (ITFSeafarers, 2003e). The entry of women into the industry is a direct result of the shortage in the sector in 2000. 'The 2000 BIMCO/ISF reported a 4% shortage of officers at sea' (Thomas, 2004:309). This shortage of officers will experience further growth if the industry does not adhere to the call for a new rank to be added; in order to fill a need created by the increased administration demands in the sector (Singh, 2013). These changes are due to the modifications to the shipping company's administration and the accountability of senior officers on ships (Singh, 2013). An additional reason for shortages is unprecedented levels of economic growth in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (Anon b, 2010:10). The direct result has been the expansion of the world maritime cargo movement and increased world commercial fleets (Anon b, 2010). According to the SIRC/ILO survey, pressure from global forces and a change in political direction towards empowering women in the 1990's saw the face of the maritime industry changing (Anon, 2003). Employers that have hired female seafarers have indicated a high level of satisfaction with them (Thomas, 2004:309). While some employers are encouraging women to enter the profession in large numbers this is not always the case.

If the labour shortage is to be addressed, female seafarers need to be seen as an untapped resource that is currently being under-utilised. Thomas (2004) indicates that female seafarers can be the solution to the

labour shortage in the maritime sector. It is estimated that female seafarers on board ships worldwide are growing daily (Anon, 2003:21). The challenge is that most of these women are confined to gendered roles on board the cruise ships and ferries (Chin, 2008:21). Women are usually employed to work in the service and hospitality division of the cruise liners. They are employed as receptionists and waitresses (Chin, 2008:21). Thomas (2004), Chin (2008) and Ruggunan (2008) have all indicated that most women are found employed in the hotels on board passenger and cruise liners.

Women Seafarers and Flags of Convenience

One of the main challenges encountered by seafarers in general but particularly women, in low paying positions, is employment on vessels flying Flags of Convenience. FOC vessels are described as a ship that is 'one that flies the flag of a country other than the country of ownership' (ITFglobal.org, 2012a). By registering as a FOC vessel, the owners are able to avoid lengthy bureaucratic processes and avoid high financial accountability and liability in their own countries (Sharda, 2012). This avoidance can result in gross human rights violations and human labour exploitation; mainly because the labour laws in the FOC states are relatively flexible and high levels of unemployment are evident in these countries (Sharda, 2012). Ship owners can avoid strict labour laws and negate minimum wage regulations set by the maritime industry of the said 'home state' (Smita, 2011). Vulnerable jobseekers are exploited and will continue to be subjugated as long as these loopholes exist. Employment on FOC vessels is amongst the worst paid and least protected of jobs for women at sea (George, 2011). It is women seafarers who work mainly on Flags Of Convenience (FOC) vessels (Couper et al., 1999:21). Due to the low pay and easy accessibility to employment on FOC registered vessels, women who seek employment here tend to be younger, and few are officers as compared to their male crew counterparts (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). This makes them extremely vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation.

These FOC vessels present a challenge for female seafarers seeking employment on board ships which provide a living wage (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). These vessels can have a significant impact on the quality of life for seafarers both at sea and on land; they are often subject to poor living conditions on board, low wages and little job security (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). On board these vessels, working hours are longer, the crew is smaller in size and people employed on board are coerced into working at the port to take over the work of the port workers (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). When seafarers are expected to perform the duties of port workers, this can result in tension between the seafarer and the port worker. This in turn can result in large numbers of port workers losing their jobs (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). In most instances when this occurs, it is the women port-workers who are the first to lose their jobs (Thomas, 2004).

Gender Bias

The low number of women on board cargo, war and merchant vessels is a contributing factor to women's sexual vulnerability on board these vessels and in the broader maritime sector (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). Unions for seafarers are actively involved; they are well aware of the vulnerable position of female seafarers on board these vessels and efforts are being made to ensure the protection of women from sexual harassment and rape on board (Finke, 2012). However, the extent to which it has been implemented, and steps that need be taken to prevent sexual harassment and rape is questionable. When ships take long periods of time to reach the shore, the on board officers seek ways for peaceful compliance between the offenders and offended, which always ends with the female seafarer being disadvantaged. The legal system protecting women differs from country to country and prosecuting the perpetrators legally is therefore extremely difficult.

When you are at sea, you get extremely lonely as a woman. Men are very lonely and make many advances on women. Sometimes your best protection when you are on board a ship is to find a male partner, as a way of protection against the other men. For

me this has been the way that I cope. If I am on a ship for nine months, I often find a boyfriend. When the other men on board the ship know that you are with someone, they will not make sexual advances towards you. I know what you must think, but I have to do this I would rather have a short-term relationship with one man than be harassed by all the men. (Female Seafarer no. 6 Interviewed, 19 September 2012).

While there are attempts to address the current situation, for the most part the situation for a large number of women seafarers remains unchanged.

Trade Unions and Women Seafarers

Trade Unions have played an important role in the protection, arrival and continued presence of women seafarers on board ships at sea (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). After the slow and continued decline of worldwide oppression, gender biased employment, and other forms of discrimination, different forms of prejudice are gradually being confronted head on. Women are beginning to enter areas of work that were historically reserved for their male counterparts (Anon, 2003). Trade unions play an important role in opening up the seafaring profession to women along with trying to securing the rights that they can access as unionised employees at sea (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been in existence since 1896 and represents over 600,000 seafarers (ITFglobal.org, 2012d).

The ITF is represented internationally and its aim is to improve conditions for seafarers of all nationalities (ITFglobal.org, 2012d). The ITF continues to fight for adequate regulation in the shipping industry which in turn protects the interests and rights of all seafarers (ITFglobal.org, 2012d). Nautilus International and the ITF affiliated unions have very strong policies that protect women seafarers (Nautilus, 2012d). It not only strives for equal opportunity for men and women. They acknowledge that women and men are exposed to different and unique stressors whilst working on board ships. This union has a dedicated telephone hotline, managed by female union employees, that assist with gender specific issues (Nautilus, 2009e:31). It is committed to attracting an

increasing number of female seafarers into the maritime industry and has incentivised women with the Victoria Drummond Award. This is awarded every four years to a female seafarer for significant achievement in any of a wide range of skills within the maritime industry (Nautilus, 2009e:62).

Men and Women on board Ships

Hansen and Jensen (1989) find that engine rooms are male-dominated with high levels of alcohol and tobacco consumption. The consumption of alcohol increases the risk of onboard fatalities (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). When a small number of female seafarers enter these male dominated spaces on the ship they often adopt the very same unhealthy and risky male behaviour. The assimilation of masculine strategies is used to present themselves in a more acceptable way to their largely male colleagues. Unhealthy behaviour and substance abuse is a problem for both genders. A female seafarer who was interviewed said:

The men and women drink and smoke heavily on board the ship. It is a way of escaping the loneliness and forgetting. Few women seafarers smoke and drink because it is expensive and they wanted to save money for their family. (Female Seafarer no. 9 Interviewed, 24 September 2012)

The number of fatal accidents both at sea and on land is high among female seafarers (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). This may be a result of them being 'influenced by their occupation towards hazardous behaviour and a high risk lifestyle'. People with a high risk lifestyle may just be attracted by or forced into high risk jobs such as traditional male jobs at sea (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). Both women and men in the maritime profession are at high-risk for suicides (Burr, 2007). An Australian study indicated that the biggest cause of stress resulted from the relationship between home and work and that family problems were the root cause of suicide amongst seafarers at sea (ITF, 2002h). Suicide risks among seafarers are thought to be linked to easy access to a means of suicide; such as drowning. The effects on people who go to sea for work include long-term separation from family and social networks, heavy alcohol

consumption, and poor mental health (Burr, 2007:54). The risk of suicide due to emotional pressure arising from familial separation is certainly an important contributing factor. Moreover, the gender bias that seafarers are subject to pushes women seafarers into this fatal decision. When a seafarer was interviewed, she described the suicide of her colleague from the Philippines.

I have also known and heard of suicides on board the ships that I have worked on, I once worked with a woman from the Philippines, she was 30 years old and she was the sole breadwinner in her family. She received news that one of her children had died in a fatal car accident and the next day she was found in her quarter's dead. She left a note for her family I knew the women well, she talked about her children all the time, her 17 year old son was her only hope for her family, he was bright and she knew that he would become a doctor. After his death, she lost all hope and killed herself. I often think of killing myself, but I know that it will not solve anything for my family or me. (Female Seafarer no. 9 Interviewed, 24 September 2012)

Gender and Race

Women have always and continue to be important contributors to the seafaring profession; their roles are critical to the transformation of the industry. Deconstructing notions of masculinity and femininity that have been historically associated with the profession remains a challenge. Women have faced challenges in both the historical and current contexts when occupying professions in the maritime sector. In particular, women from India, the Philippines, China, South Korea, South America, Africa and other parts of Asia face difficulties in terms of unfamiliar cultural contexts when embarking on a profession at sea (Thomas, 2004: 311). The perceived incompatibility of a career at sea, the role of motherhood, the women's gendered role within the family and her role as a wife and mother place an additional burden and stress on female seafarers.

Despite my absence from my home for a long time, I must come home to take over when I am here. I should use the time to rest, but there is no rest for

me. I must work on the ship and I must work at home. (Women Seafarer 9 Interviewed, 26 January 2013)

The double-burden that women are forced to bear in negotiating the demands placed upon them at work and within their traditionally gendered roles as wives, daughters and mothers is highly demanding. Women seafarers can also face a degree of alienation from both family and community when she returns home after an extended absence. This sense of alienation is well expressed by the following quote relayed by a woman seafarer when she was interviewed.

If I could earn the same amount of money at home I would never work on a ship. I would be prepared to do anything in my country. The problem is that there are no jobs. I had no choice. If I was not at work at sea my family would starve, we would be out on the streets. My family is respected now. They are respected because they have money in a poor community. When I go home, the women welcome me; the men are indifferent because they feel that I am doing a man's job. I am a mother I have to do what I can to support my family. I pay my brother and his wife to take care of my children. If I did not have them I would not be able to leave for work. I give my brother everything I earn. Every month 80% of my salary is paid to him. I receive 20% in cash on the ship. I save everything. I have to hide this money from my brother. I am saving this money to start a shop at home in a few years. Sometimes I receive tips on board the ship and I save this. I do not buy toiletries, when I clean the room after a cruise people leave things behind. I collect this and use it. I do not use the laundry facilities on the ship; I wash my own clothes by hand and iron them myself. (Female Seafarer no. 5 Interviewed, 19 November 2012)

The colour of the women seafarers' skin is also a factor that determines the gender bias that she will experience on the ship. Female seafarers with lighter skin tones are usually placed in frontline jobs such as the information desks, whereas, women with 'darker' skin tones are 'hidden, behind the scenes' in invisible cleaning and catering jobs (Chin, 2008:21). Issues of gender equity and linkages between the caste/race-based systems that are based on skin tone are perpetuated in certain countries and there is evidence of these practices having reached the ship.

Pregnant Women at Sea

The rights of women at sea are governed by a series of laws. They are determined by the laws of their birth country, if and when they are sailing on a ship of their home country (Finke, 2012). Alternatively and in some cases, this could be in addition to the rights guaranteed to them by their employer. Those individuals that are members of unions will also be protected under their 'union's collective bargaining agreements' (Finke, 2012). If a female seafarer works on a ship that does not belong to their home country, also known as a 'Flag of Convenience vessel', the members have rights that are accorded by that particular countries flag 'which might not give any maternity rights at all' (ITF, 2012g). The ITF does provide basic and minimum rights for seafarers both men and women (ITF, 2012g). The ITF-approved agreements for merchant vessels stipulate that pregnant seafarers '[m]ust be repatriated at the cost of the company; must receive two months' full pay in compensation'. (ITF, 2012g).

These basic rights depend on a new set of principles and qualifiers introduced in the 1990's which include the timing of the repatriation which may vary depending on, where you work and your stage of pregnancy, where the ship is trading coastally, or if there is a doctor is on board, it is generally safer for pregnant women to work later into a pregnancy - in Britain, she can work until the 28th week (ITF, 2012g). However, if she was working on deep-sea vessels or a very high speed seacraft, the risks need to be carefully assessed (ITF, 2012g). Current practices such as pregnancy testing before offering employment to women violates basic International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 183 (ITF, 2012g).

I was pregnant when I signed my first contract for six months. I was so afraid of losing my job. I did not disclose my condition to anyone. It was a very difficult time for me. There was a female captain on board the ship and she had suspected that I was pregnant. I did not get any benefits because I had only worked for the company for six months. Six weeks after my baby was born I returned to the ship for an additional six months. I have been with the company for eight years and I work for nine months every year. I spend three months at home. (Female Seafarer no. 4 Interviewed, 12 September 2012)

The above interview with a female engineer was conducted at the Sailors Society in Umbilo Road, Durban. She did not disclose the name of her company. The 28-year-old woman was from Malawi. She obtained funding to read for an engineering degree in Amsterdam. After she completed her degree in engineering, she made numerous applications for employment. Through her networks in Amsterdam, she became aware of opportunities for employment at sea. This job required further training at a Maritime college. Securing the necessary funds, she pursued her studies. At the age of 24 she managed to secure an entry level job on board a ship. This was a very difficult choice for her as she had already been away from her family home in Malawi for six years. She decided to make a trip home before she began her life at sea. When she returned to Malawi, she succumbed to family and community pressure and wed her current husband whom her family had selected for her. After her three-month stay at home, she was off to South Africa where she would board a ship and set sail. She was about to begin her career at sea. Although this was an entry-level position and she had many hours of training ahead of her in the engineering department, her first job at sea was going to be ten months. Ten months away from her husband and her family. Communication with her family was not always easy. The communication depended on where the ship was, how close it was to a port and a series of other environmental and geographical factors. Communication was often expensive at sea and therefore she was limited to email communication.

She left with excitement and was happy to be earning in an international currency. She worked hard in the beginning and after three weeks at sea she had taken ill. Other seafarers told her that it was common and she would soon be well again, once she had found her sea legs. She waited patiently for her health to improve. After three days she began to feel worse and decided to visit the ship's doctor. She soon discovered that she was pregnant and she did not know what to do. Her whole world began to crumble around her. She had never intended on starting a family so soon. What was she going to do, would she give birth on board the ship, would she be fired, would this be the

end of her life at sea?

She spoke to her Captain and she was granted an unpaid leave of absence. When she was eight months pregnant the ship would dock in South Africa. She was to disembark and the company would cover her costs to return home. She would then be entitled to maternity leave for a period of twelve weeks. Thereafter she was expected to return to the ship. She would be notified of the Port closer to the time. She remarks:

I am lucky I am an engineer and have skills, I am not sure whether I would have been this lucky if I was an unskilled seafarer.

Female seafarers' responses regarding their knowledge of their companies maternity policies, affirms Belcher's research (2003). It is evident that few women seafarers know what their maternity rights are; or they are not properly informed about their rights as was the case with Female Seafarer no. 4. Belcher (2003: 60) points out that women are required to take pregnancy tests before joining crew ships. The failure of maritime companies to inform women about their basic rights is viewed as a human rights violation. An ITF resource book for trade union negotiators in the transport sector points out that human rights violation for pregnant women are rampant in the industry. Research indicates that 16% of women were not entitled to maternity leave with cash benefits, 30% stated that pregnant employees did not have the right to guaranteed job transfers without loss of earnings, and 14% had restrictions imposed upon them after returning from maternity leave (Finke, 2012).

All ships have a medical officer onboard. Women have reported that their roster does not always coincide with the availability of the medical officer, therefore making it difficult to seek medical attention (Belcher, 2003:60). When a seafarer requires medical help or advice whilst on duty, their supervisor has to sign a form which indicates the reason for medical consultation. This can become problematic when a female seafarer would prefer to keep her reasons for seeking medical help confidential (Belcher, 2003: 59). Female seafarers have also reported similar insensitivity and logistical problems in obtaining and disposing of female sanitary products, and this can subsequently

result in stress for her (Belcher, 2003:62). In an informal discussion conducted with a male seafarer active in the oil industry, he revealed:

I suppose they can throw it overboard. Similarly, a female seafarer said that they were told to keep their 'feminine products' sealed in plastic bags until it can be disposed of at land (Female Seafarer no. 3 Interviewed, 16 February 2013).

This provides clear evidence that the profession is highly male centred and amenities for women are provided on an ad hoc basis.

In order to broaden the understanding of women's experiences on board a ship a semi-structured interview was designed and sent out to twelve previously identified female seafarers. One was filled in by an Australian woman in her 40s (Respondent-no.9, 2013). She worked in the Oil and Gas Industry and in the pearling and fishing industries for more than twelve years. When asked 'Did you find it easy or challenging to find employment in the maritime industry?' Her response was:

I had to work harder initially to 'prove' myself to the male working population. One job I had working for...I earned considerably less than my male work colleagues earned, and never received a pay rise or any extra tickets. Some of the male management also tried to run me off... because it wasn't 'appropriate' for a woman to be doing the job I was doing. ... (Respondent-no.9, 2013)

Coping Strategies

According to Klein (2001: 90) both men and women often have to pay to secure employment on board cruise ships. The dream of a good job with a secure income outweighs the costs and their long absence away from their family, friends and home. However, when they go on board ships they are faced with a different reality. A reality that promises 12-14 hours of work a day, seven days a week with little or no time for themselves (Klein, 2001:92). Loneliness and an isolated work environment becomes reality very early into their employment contracts (ITF, 2002h). Bribery and corruption on board these ships are rife. Seafarers are forced to succumb to bribes to secure efficient and timely laundry service, suitable

accommodation and a salary that feeds their families (Klein, 2001:100). This point is well substantiated by one woman seafarer:

If you know the right people on board the ship, you can get a good cabin and you can get good working hours. You have to know how things work on the ship. When you are new on board it is difficult. You must be prepared to spend money for favours. (Female Seafarer no. 2 Interviewed, 25 October 2012)

Hansen (1989) argues that 'mobility and isolation characterise the workplace of the seafarer' and working on a ship removes individuals from a daily familial setting. They can no longer play a role in the day-to-day living of the family as a direct result of their prolonged absence. Female seafarers have adopted a series of coping strategies to deal with life at sea. Unlike the adaptive techniques of adopting masculine strategies, these coping mechanisms may result in more benefits that are positive. The practical day-to-day challenges they face cannot be altered and neither can their long absences from home be changed.

One of the strategies that have been adopted is focusing on the job at hand. Being able to keep busy allows little time for the type of self-reflection that results in pity, depression and loneliness. Other adaptive techniques have been to focus on and appreciate the continuously changing work environment. Despite the difficulties, learning to appreciate small benefits in the job is a further coping mechanism. Though many difficulties exist in seafaring, they are willing to accept the job as a woman seafarer reflects:

We could spend our entire workweek complaining about the problems with our job but that wouldn't get us anywhere! For instance, I could moan and complain each day when I am at work on the ship about how much I miss my partner and life back home on the farm. But how would I perform to the best of my ability at work? I just wouldn't. Instead of feeling homesick or worrying about missing my loved ones I try to focus on the joys of my job and how much I love doing what I do for a living. I mean who works in an environment where their scenery changes every day. Sighting dolphins and whales on a regular basis, experiencing the feeling of night sailing under the moon and star lit sky and as well at the sights, living in a place where you have your own chefs, stewards and cabin attendants. What more could you want? (ITF, 2012g)

In addition to deriving job satisfaction from focusing on the job at hand, regular communication with family and loved-ones can help mitigate the feelings of deprivation, isolation and loneliness. With the rapid development of Information Computer Technology, this can allow for sustained and effective 'cyber parenting'. Although working at sea can be an interesting and gratifying occupation it can subsequently take its toll on the seafarers social and family life (ITF, 2002h). In the event that the seafarer is unable to overcome feelings of isolation, their workplace becomes a stressful environment (ITF, 2002h). This feeling of isolation can be addressed if the ship owners are cognisant and responsive to the needs of their maritime workers. According to the Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) a stable content seafarer is a productive seafarer. The SIRC claims that there are three main psychological problems which seafarers develop. These have been identified as loneliness, homesickness and 'burn out'.

Recent research approaches demonstrate that qualitative research is increasingly becoming a fundamental tool to provide seafarers with a platform to articulate how they cope with stress. Unlike previous quantitative approaches which track trends, qualitative data collection allows for the expression of opinions and narratives that can subsequently offer explanations for trends in qualitative data (Bailey, 2007:10). Clinical sociologists are beginning to enter the field based on existing qualitative research.

Conclusion

The ITF and the ILO along with trade unions have highlighted a series of key areas that remain priority for women seafarers, which include the following:

Reducing gender stereotypes within the industry; provision of sanitary items on board ships; access to confidential medical advice, contraceptives and the morning-after pill; consistent and improved approach to maternity benefits and rights; development of sexual harassment policies; and appropriate training including cadet training and education (ITF, 2012g).

Since 2000 the ITF have negotiated with the cruise ship industry - which has a reputation for the

most number of human rights abuses - for the implementation and realisation of women's rights. Although agreements differ slightly from cruise ship to cruise ship, the standard ITF approach is to try and realise a work environment in which women are free from all forms of harassment such as bullying, sexual and racial abuse (ITF, 2012i). ITF cruise line policies also state that the normal hours of duty should be eight hours per day, five days a week, with a 10 hour rest period per 24 hour period; currently it is 77 hours in a seven-day period (ITF, 2012i). In the event that any subsequent hours are worked, overtime has to be paid (ITF, 2012i). With these changes, the environment is not easy and seafarers have to adapt and learn to cope. They are forced to cope with the long absences from home, long working hours, limited rest periods, gender discrimination, limited benefits, limited medical and recreational facilities and loneliness.

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