

Helen Sampson & Iris Acejo

# The port-based welfare needs of women seafarers



Seafarers International Research Centre  
Cardiff University  
[www.sirc.cf.ac.uk](http://www.sirc.cf.ac.uk)

[SampsonH@cf.ac.uk](mailto:SampsonH@cf.ac.uk)  
[Acejol@cf.ac.uk](mailto:Acejol@cf.ac.uk)

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## Executive Summary

### **Introduction**

This study of the working lives and welfare needs of women seafarers was supported by The Seafarers' Charity. The aim of the research was to provide an understanding of the port-based welfare needs of women seafarers and to consider how well these are currently met.

The research findings derive from 30 confidential in-depth interviews with women seafarers and five interviews with port-based welfare providers. Interviews were fully transcribed and were thematically coded using NVivo software. Pseudonyms are used throughout the report.

### **Findings**

Despite working on the same vessels, the experiences of male and female seafarers differ considerably. This is primarily due to the minority status of women on board and the various ways in which they experience exclusion and fear.

#### *Exclusion*

Women described encountering many direct and indirect ways of being excluded. Many encountered male colleagues who explicitly told them that they did not belong on board and should accept a shore-based position or stay at home and raise a family. Such comments created a difficult working and living environment for women who felt unwanted and resented by the very colleagues they were expected to work with. The attitudes of some male seafarers could cause women even greater difficulties on occasions when they refused to accept the authority of women seniors. This presented women with a management difficulty, but it could also lead their senior officers to assume that they lacked leadership qualities to the detriment of their career.

At an interactional level women seafarers also felt excluded by their colleagues' enjoyment of explicit sexual jokes and comments about women as well as the collective viewing of pornography.

Exclusion also operated at an institutional level with companies and ports failing to provide facilities and products relating to menstruation. Every single participant described inadequate shipboard provision for the disposal of sanitary waste and most women were unable to purchase sanitary products on board. Even when women broached the subject, their requests for provision did not result in any positive action. In terms of the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) women's needs were also overlooked with the result that they frequently worked in PPE that was too large for them and sometimes resorted to purchasing their own PPE ashore and bringing it in their luggage.

Exclusion also characterised the career trajectories and training opportunities provided to some women. Convincing examples were given of women being discriminated against in the promotion process and in relation to access to useful training.

As a result of their minority status, and of the prejudices they encountered, women described being under a spotlight with regard to their work and character and continually needing to prove themselves which was exhausting.

#### *Fear*

Not only did women describe feeling excluded to varying degrees on board but they also described fearing for their own safety in ways that did not relate to the occupational shipboard hazards they

encountered but instead related to sexual harassment and assault by colleagues. Participants provided many examples of sexual harassment by male seafarers working in both junior and senior roles. They described the moral dilemmas such behaviour often caused as they wrestled with their emotions, knowing that complaints of harassment could have serious determinantal effects on fellow seafarers' careers. Most shockingly, many women seafarers described feeling so under threat on board that not only did they lock their cabin doors at night, but they frequently rigged up second locks or alternative barring mechanisms to block unwanted entry by colleagues. Fear of harassment and gossip also led many women to exclude themselves from social activities and friendships on board making an already solitary existence at sea, extraordinarily lonely.

#### *Port-based welfare needs*

In relation to both exclusion and fear the research revealed the very different shipboard experiences of women seafarers, in general, compared to their male counterparts. Their work in an environment where they practice self-isolation as a defence mechanism and where legitimate fears about colleagues' actions are harboured, creates strong additional port-based welfare needs amongst women seafarers. These are not always fully understood by those working in port-welfare and even where they are well-understood the minority status of women seafarers may mean that efforts are not made to address them as welfare providers cater for the needs of the many and not the few.

In terms of psycho-social support, women seafarers described a strong desire for personal face to face interactions with welfare workers. They described how these can help to counteract feelings of loneliness, they allow women seafarers to make a human connection that they may deny themselves on board and they provide them with a confidant should they feel a need to share their concerns and fears. Some women seafarers were happy to have a chaplain or volunteer of any gender to talk to, but in some cases, women felt that they were more at ease with other women. Where remote digital welfare services are provided, women felt that these could be very helpful but preferred to link with advisors or volunteers with some experience of life as a woman on board a vessel. In this context chat apps allowing women seafarers to connect with other serving women seafarers were also seen as attractive.

In relation to material support, women seafarers expressed a desire for access to more female products and facilities when ashore in seafarers' centres. These included menstrual and beauty products and services as well as female clothing and souvenirs aimed at women.

#### **Conclusion**

The minority status of women seafarers creates the context for many of the problems which women experience in relation to exclusion and fear on board. These problems give rise to specific welfare needs among women seafarers but regrettably their minority status is also a major reason for such needs remaining unmet.

#### **Recommendations**

The report recommends that:

1. Port-welfare centres provide women seafarers with access to facilities for the bulk disposal of used sanitary products.
2. Menstrual care products are made available to women seafarers either free of charge or on an 'at cost' basis. These should include disposable items such as sanitary towels and tampons but importantly they should also include re-usable items such as menstrual cups and period pants.

3. Staffed centres remain in place as these provide women seafarers, in particular, with a much-needed source of human interaction.
4. Seafarers' centres review material provision for women seafarers paying special attention to available clothing size and style, the subject matter of magazines and books, toiletries and skin care products and gifts and games.
5. Seafarers' centres do their utmost to attract a staff body (whether paid or unpaid) with a balanced gender profile.
6. Charitable organisations consider the development of an app to facilitate chat facilities for women seafarers which includes access to general chat forums for women seafarers (only) alongside more specialised one-to-one chat services with appropriately qualified and experienced personnel. Furthermore, this app should be supported by provision for shipboard follow-up visits to women seafarers who are in need, with account taken of some women's preference to talk with other women who have an understanding of shipboard life.
7. Seafarers' centres review the facilities provided to seafarers and consider the degree to which they offer a balance between amenities that are generally more attractive to men and amenities that are more attractive to women.
8. Information is provided to women seafarers about the support and facilities which are specifically targeted to their needs in port. This information should be taken on board by chaplains and ship visitors (in hard copy format) but should also be described on the websites of seafarers' centres and welfare organisations.

## Introduction

In early 2022, The Seafarers' Charity provided a grant to Helen Sampson and Iris Acejo at the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) to support a study of the port-based welfare needs of women seafarers. Although the lives and experiences of women seafarers have received a small amount of attention from social science researchers (Belcher et al 2003, Kitada 2010, Zhao et al 2017, Kitada 2021, Pike et al 2021), the existing data are limited (in relation to nationality, for example) and, in some cases, out of date. Furthermore, some of the more recent studies in this area, have been quantitative in nature (IMHA et al 2015, Nastali and Bartlett 2021) and have therefore been unable to provide a detailed understanding of the positive and negative aspects of women's experiences of working in the merchant cargo sector.

The need for this study was highlighted in a report describing the findings from a study of faith and the related welfare needs of seafarers working in the international cargo sector. The report indicated the significance, for seafarers, of the work undertaken by chaplains, volunteers and staff based in seafarers' centres. However, it also highlighted the relatively small number of women seafarers who appeared to be making use of port-based welfare facilities, and seafarers' centres in particular. As a result, one of the recommendations from the study was for further research to be undertaken, to provide a greater understanding of the needs of women seafarers and the ways in which port-based welfare services could be better tailored to meet them. The study which we report on here, aimed to specifically address this gap in our knowledge. In focussing upon the port-based welfare needs of women seafarers, it addresses an area that has not received specific attention from researchers in the past. These port-based welfare needs are contextualised by considering the gender-related problems which active women seafarers, across the globe, encounter and navigate today. This approach allows us to develop a deeper understanding of why women seafarers may have specific needs that differ from their male counterparts in relation to port-based welfare provision and it will provide us with a sense of how significant their needs are and how urgently they need addressing.

The overall aim of the research was, therefore, to arrive at a detailed understanding of the port-based welfare needs of women seafarers and the extent to which active women seafarers feel that these are currently met. More specifically our intention was to explore the following:

- The gender-related problems that women seafarers encounter in the cargo sector.
- The experience and use of port-based welfare facilities by participants.
- Perceived barriers to the use of port-based welfare facilities.
- Experiences and views of innovative methods which have been devised to serve seafarers' welfare needs during the pandemic.
- Preferences for the delivery and scope of port-based welfare services in the future.

In addition, we sought to provide some insight into how service providers understand the following:

- The use of port-based welfare services by active women seafarers.
- Barriers to the use of port-based welfare services by women seafarers.
- Ways of improving the appropriateness and accessibility of services for women seafarers.
- Advantages and disadvantages of new ways of delivering welfare services to seafarers established as a result of the pandemic.

## Research Methods

### Recruitment and sample characteristics

Given that women seafarers only constitute around 1% of seafarers working in the merchant sector we appreciated, from the outset, that the recruitment of our target number of 30 women seafarer participants would be likely to be a challenge. We therefore drew up a multi-stranded recruitment strategy that involved advertising the research in various ways and inviting interested participants to contact us. We anticipated that once some women had agreed to take part in the research, they would be able to inform other potential participants about the study and encourage them to consider taking part. This strategy for the recruitment of interviewees is termed 'snowball sampling' and it was successful to an extent. However, the success of the strategy was constrained by the limited contact that many of our participants had with other women seafarers. This limited contact was not something we had anticipated, as we had imagined that women seafarers would have more frequently formed bonds with the other female seafarers they encountered as cadets in college, or as colleagues on board. The fact that they had infrequently formed such bonds led to unforeseen recruitment challenges. As a result, we reinforced our efforts with increased publicity via publications produced for seafarers (we wrote articles for *The Sea* published by the Mission to Seafarers and for *Seaways* published by Nautilus for example), via employers, via associations, and via social media.

Our definition of eligible women seafarers included those who had worked in the cargo sector and in other more specialised areas such as offshore, dredging, and on-board yachts. Seafarers normally had training to work for either the marine or engineering departments of their vessels, but some worked in the galley as catering personnel and in the case of superyachts they could sometimes combine both marine (deck or engine) and non-marine (hotel and catering) roles. Our participant women seafarers came from countries all over the world but were mostly from Asia which reflects current recruitment strategies for seafarers overall. A few participants were from Europe and the USA, and one was from Africa. Participants ranged in age from 21-45 and were almost equally divided between those aged under 30 and those aged 31-51 (n= 15 and 14 respectively). Women seafarer participants served in ranks across the board from 'messwoman' to chief officer but there were more participants working in the deck than the engine department (n=21 and 7 respectively) and only two participants worked in the hotel department/galley. We did not have representation from seafarers who had served in the two highest ranks of chief engineer and captain (see Table 1), however, we did interview one participant who was just about to undertake her first voyage as captain.

Table 1: Characteristics of women seafarers participating in our research (blue shading represents missing data)

	Age 30 and under	Age 31 to 51	Age over 52	Deck	Engine	Hospitality	Europe	USA	Asia	Africa
01	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
02		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
03	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
04		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
05					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
06	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
07	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
08	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
09		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
10	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
11	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
12		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
13		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
14		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
15		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
16	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
17		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
18		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
19	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
20	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
21	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
22		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
23		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
24	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
25		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
26		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
27	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
28	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
29		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>					<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
30	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>1</b>

### Interview content and approach

We chose to undertake 30 semi-structured interviews with seafarers and five further interviews with port-based welfare workers. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed us to focus on a relatively small range of relevant topics, but the format was relaxed and open enough to allow seafarers to talk about issues in their own ways, and at length. Interviews were conducted using Zoom (or a similar package if Zoom was unsuitable) and seafarers were interviewed in a variety of



settings including their homes, their cabins, and in one case their hotel room (where they were located prior to joining a vessel). The use of internet-based interviews allowed us to reach active seafarers of different nationalities with experience of vessels owned and operated by companies across the world. Port-based welfare workers were interviewed, using an internet-based platform, at home or at work according to their preferences.

In our interviews, we encouraged participant seafarers to describe for us the kind of daily life that they experienced as women working on board sea-going vessels. We teased out the experiences that participants felt were gender-related or gender-specific and we explored how these experiences impacted on women, in order to understand the specific needs that women might have in relation to port-based welfare services. We then went on to consider the kinds of support which they had personally drawn upon when facing hard times at sea and their experiences of welfare support provided by maritime charities and other welfare organisations. Our interviews with women seafarers culminated in an exploration of the kinds of welfare services they would like to see provided to seafarers, in order to cater for women seafarers' needs as well as those of their male colleagues.

In interviewing port-based welfare providers we sought to gain an insight into how they understood the needs of women seafarers, their perceptions of the services that are more and less useful, and used, in relation to women seafarers, and their ideas about how to improve the services provided to women seafarers at ports around the globe.

All study participants were free to withdraw from their interview at any time and all were asked for fully informed consent prior to their interview. We also assured participants that they could decline to answer any question at any time and that we would not mind them doing so. However, we found that, on the whole, women were keen to share their experiences with us, even where these had been painful. No participants withdrew from the study, nor did any decline to answer specific questions, although, in a small number of cases, we felt that women were taking care over what they disclosed at interview in order to protect themselves or others. By in large, they were motivated by the desire to make things better for other women joining their industry. For example, one said to us 'I really feel that it has to be improved, in this industry, for a woman...some things. I am the kind of person if I see something wrong, people say when I get to a place I leave a change, so I want to leave a change' (Tobin, Rating, Europe). Their sense of commitment to revealing the truth about the industry led some women to be open, for the very first time, about some of the issues that they had faced on board. Nicola told us for example that 'mainly I just open up now, I've never talked about it' (Nicola, Rating, Asia).

## Analysis and reporting

In order to undertake a thorough analysis of the interview data, we fully transcribed all interviews and then thematically coded the transcripts with the assistance of computer software (NVivo 12). Coding was undertaken with reference to both the research questions and the interview questions and was designed to reflect positive and negative cases and to enable us to gauge the extent to which a view was exceptional or widely held.

In reporting on the data, the experiences of women are grouped around key themes which are considered likely to impact on their need for welfare support and for particular kinds of welfare support. For example, many women described the detailed ways in which the shipboard masculine environment was unwelcoming for women, sending them a message that women did not belong on

board. The means by which this message was conveyed included (but was not confined to) the diverse issues of absence of PPE in appropriate sizes for women; lack of provision of sanitary disposal facilities; and lack of products designed for women in the slop chest. Despite the considerable differences between these issues, and the ways they are experienced on board, they all reinforce the message that women are regarded as exceptions in a male dominated workplace. The feeling of not belonging on board shapes women's experiences of work at sea and it produces a need for a kind of welfare support that is absent amongst men. Thus, the diverse topics of being directly told that women had no place on board, encouragement to apply for office jobs, not being respected on board, PPE, sanitary disposal, and availability of products for women in the slop chest, are all discussed under the sub heading of 'Women don't belong here'.

The report makes use of pseudonyms, throughout, in place of the names of interview participants and of companies. The nationality of seafarers is reported, in a grouped fashion by region, alongside their status as either a rating (serving in the lower ranks on board) or an officer as these two factors are considered to be the most significant variables in shaping women's experiences at sea. Age is also a significant factor, but we are reluctant to provide details about age in order to avoid the unintentional disclosure of participants' identities. We have therefore chosen not to include age when quoting from individuals. In terms of the impact of age on our findings, we found that, on the whole, women described fewer interactional problems on board as they gained experience and confidence, however, some aspects of their experience did not alter, such as in relation to the provision of PPE.

## Findings

### The experience of being a woman seafarer

On the surface, the suggestion that women seafarers experience life on board differently to men might seem surprising. After all, they share the same confined spaces, experience the same remoteness from family and friends and endure the same working and living conditions whilst on board. However, closer scrutiny indicates that the presence of women in such small numbers on board cargo ships produces conditions of work which are very different for them as compared with their male counterparts. Were women present in the same numbers as men on board working cargo vessels, we would anticipate that many of the problems that they currently face would be resolved. This presents any individuals and/or organisations who are concerned to help women seafarers with something of a paradox. On the one hand, the minority status of women seafarers on board cargo vessels is also the root cause of many of their shipboard challenges, and on the other hand any initiatives aimed at women will inevitably only benefit a small number of individuals. Some organisations may feel that if a project or programme only benefits tens of women seafarers, rather than thousands, then it is not worth pursuing. However, the findings from this study show that women seafarers currently have many unaddressed needs and endure difficult circumstances in which they would benefit considerably from targeted shoreside welfare support. The quantity of women seafarers who will benefit from any individual initiative targeted to support them may be small but the need for such support and the impact of such initiatives is potentially huge. It is also vital if more women are to be attracted to a long-term career at sea.

As a minority group serving on cargo vessels, women face a number of challenges. These are self-evidently diverse, and experiences vary from company to company and from ship to ship. They also impact most strongly on women in the early stages of their careers when they have less experience to guide them and less seniority to protect them. Notwithstanding these variations, the data nevertheless portray a very strong picture of the challenges that almost all women seafarers face at some point in the course of their careers. Most of the experiences that we describe in the forthcoming text are universally recognised by women seafarers who encounter them on a relatively regular basis. It is possible that cases exist where such experiences are not recognised and have not been experienced, however, we have not encountered any such cases in this study. The challenges to women that were identified in this research included being made to feel like exceptions to the norm on board a cargo vessel, not having basic needs met, experiencing discrimination, experiencing fear, and enduring extreme isolation.

#### ‘Women don’t belong here’: Feeling unwelcome and out of place on board

There are some companies where women seafarers are welcomed and are recruited in relatively significant numbers alongside the predominantly male workforce. However, there are also many companies which do not recruit any female seafarers at all. Overall, it remains rare to encounter women seafarers on board cargo vessels. Their minority status results in a number of issues. They are generally made to feel unwelcome by some shipboard colleagues at some stage of their career. This can be via the expression of explicit hostility and an expressed antagonism towards women seafarers, but it may also be conveyed more subtly with suggestions made by male colleagues, that they should consider spending time in the ‘office’ rather than returning to sea ... for their own benefit. Where male seafarers were strongly antagonistic to the very notion of women seafarers they would go so far as to disregard the instructions of women who were in a position of authority. This is extremely unusual behaviour in the context of a strong shipboard hierarchy and a fear amongst most seafarers of being sent home for bad behaviour. To be repatriated in such circumstances can result in the termination of a seafarer’s career.

The directness of some of the hostile comments and behaviours that women had to endure on board was shocking. In themselves, such comments may be expected to impact on women’s self-esteem, feeling of worth, and mental health and wellbeing (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: 'Women don't belong here!'

'Even now, the number of female seafarers is growing they will still be telling [...]...you will stop sailing because this is not your world. **This is not where you belong**'. (Pia, Officer, Asia)

'Sometimes when we have this discussion with male counterparts, they would make this comment. Or sometimes comments on Facebook. You would see these comments like 'aah **females do not belong onboard**, they are just doing this to make our lives difficult.' Something like this. (Paula, Officer, Asia)

To him I am just a guest because he does not really trust women. So that was my first time to be onboard the ship, so there, I feel not so important. **You feel like, 'I don't belong here'** something like that. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

Well, one person told me that **women don't belong at sea**. Well, this person was very ... had very strong opinions about it, he said that I just belong in the home. And, I should raise children. (Karina, Officer, Americas)

'Definitely, I have experienced a lot of crew mates that still think that why are you working on the ship? Why are you risking your life? **This is not a world for you, this is not an industry for you**, it's always like that. (Marni, Rating, Asia)

Throughout my career I have definitely come across it, I'm quite lucky that I'm a very strong character so I don't take offence easily and am also quite vocal and quite fearless, I guess and I can stand up for myself, I mean I've had comments you know, **women shouldn't be at sea**, and things like that but I just tend to meet it with humour kind of thing so I'll send a witty quip back to them using humour to put them down and then I get left alone. (Rowna, Officer Europe)

Some of the comments which women seafarers made to us, gave a strong impression of the impact of hostile male attitudes on their emotional and psychological welfare. Sandra for example, explained how hard it was to face up to living and working with people who she felt rejected by on a daily basis. She described how:

I don't have any choice but to meet them, to see them every day and be reminded that they don't like me onboard. (Sandra, Rating, Asia)

Arni felt similarly distressed and low in spirits when working with a captain who made her feel disliked and undervalued. She told us how:

My department head, [...] he doesn't like female onboard because according to him female onboard is like a liability. He seems to dislike me. [...] He directly told me that he doesn't like having females onboard. [...] I was very young at that time so I was not so understanding of others' behaviour, so I have a heavy-heart towards him. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

Other women described how they felt disregarded and overlooked on board to the extent that they felt they were denied any 'voice'. In these circumstances some felt aggrieved and distressed about the extent to which colleagues made them feel worthless, as if they didn't count for anything. Rosa explained that:

Most of them have never seen a woman onboard before and acceptance is very, very slow. We were always told 'oh you girls will be here for a few months, a few years, junior rank and then you never come out at sea'. Why do we risk our lives is sort of the reaction all the time, you know? So yeah, it was difficult to get the acceptance and also difficult to be heard as a group because you feel that everything is going over somebody's head. They are not listening or they don't value your voice, your opinion, so I felt very neglected on that ship. (Rosa, Officer, Asia)

In these various ways women felt excluded from the crews on board their vessels. They felt unwanted, undervalued, and isolated. However, even where this was not the case, women still received the message that they were the exception – something that stood out – rather than the rule. This prevented them from feeling just like an ordinary member of the crew, something that many women seafarers longed for as Rowna described. She told us that:

I just wanted to fit in. I didn't like I guess being the odd one out, or being pointed out and give you an example now that I'm aware of it. I don't like it when there's one captain and a meeting who says, right gents and lady, they point it out and point to me all the time where some people quite like that to be included for me personally I didn't like being excluded by having to be pointed out. I'm just at work gender isn't an issue for me I don't go around thinking about gender I just want to go to work and do my job and go home. (Rowna, Officer, European)

Alongside an overt hostility to women seafarers, there were also more nuanced ways with which male seafarers demonstrated a reluctance to work alongside women and managed to convey to women that they did not belong on board. One of these, involved encouraging women to seek positions ashore. This could be presented as beneficial to the women concerned and to their careers. However, women interpreted it as an expression of the rejection of women seafarers by male colleagues. One explained how:

There's a lot of women in the office at [name of company]. Most of whom used to work on a ship, and I don't know if ... I think they're quite pushed to work in the office, because when

I was on board, a lot of people said you should go in the office, and after this trip you should apply for the office. (Czarina, officer, European)

Another described how:

For me, first it is hard to get the acceptance because I am a female seafarer. Of course, I was in a male-dominated industry. They are looking at me like...I must be... 'oh why are you here in the ship, why not in the office?' Those types of questions. It's because women are not yet accepted in this industry. You have to prove yourself on the things that they thought you won't be able to do. (Jen, Officer, Asia)

However, some women experienced this attitude to such a degree, that when they applied for sea-based jobs, they were offered positions in the office instead. This was not an experience which their male colleagues were familiar with. Hilda approached a company for a job at the suggestion of a seafarer friend and explained that:

I know this Filipino captain he said try to this company, my present company, I sent CV, I apply and they offer me job, office job. (Hilda, Officers, Asia)

Whilst Mira found herself confined to the shore-based office after the birth of her first child, and in receipt of lower pay as a result. She described how she was forced out:

So, after my first child, yeah, I went back to the last company, and they decided that they will not assign me on board yet. Instead, I will just work in the office. But then when I was, during my during my early years with them, I used to work in the office and I used to, I used to be a guardian of some of the cadets in the company. I could say that this is just an experience, but in financial matters, it isn't because I wasn't given the standard salary or compensation as an employee of this job. So I said, [...] I don't have any plans to work yet in the office job. So, then they said, they didn't have the guarantee that I can still go back on board. So, I asked for my documents. And then that's it, I was out. (Mira, Officer, Asia)

These mechanisms via which women strongly received the message that they did not belong onboard and were not welcome were universally described by our participants. However, for some women the issue became even more problematic when they found subordinate members of their team unwilling to follow their instructions. This could count against women very strongly, as it was seen as an inability to exercise authority on board. Such authority is regarded as a requirement for a good officer. Ethel gave us quite a full picture when she described how:

When I was a cadet and when I was junior officer, I encountered a lot of culture shock [...]. In my opinion maybe traditional seamen [...] they are not used to having girls onboard. For example, I was third officer that time and I have this AB and maybe he is not used to following orders or taking orders from a female seafarer. It's like having a lady boss so it's kinda hard for them to follow so I really need to do a lot of pep talk with them. So 'there's not any gender here, we should disregard if I am more younger than you so you should follow me because I am your officer', something like that. I think those things that I encountered, what matters most was how you educate them, how you tell them or make them realise that you should follow me because I am the boss here. [...] During my first years as an officer, I did a lot of pep talk with my ratings but I will just admit humbly that I once cried because once in a while you will just encounter people that...it is really hard for them to follow. During that time, I was a third officer I cried but not in front of him, after I did the pep talk then I cried in my cabin then that's it. I told myself that that would be the last time I

would do that. [...] Actually, the reason I cried [was] because the captain during that time was so mad at me because he thought I cannot handle my men, so I was kind of emotional during that time. Because this person is kind of insisting he is doing the right one and then...he just cannot accept what I was telling him. So, realisation-wise, I just told myself that you cannot please everybody. So, if he doesn't want to follow, okay. I will just make report. (Ethel, Officer, Asia)

Direct comments and insubordination were common ways in which antagonistic male seafarers made women seafarers feel as though they were unwelcome at sea. While most participants told us about such experiences, they did not imply that all male seafarers were hostile to them as individuals, or to the idea of working alongside women seafarers on board. Indeed, examples were given of individuals who were helpful to them whilst they were on board. These efforts to be supportive were always appreciated by women, but there was no suggestion from participants that they could counteract the powerfully negative messages conveyed by malicious and unkind individuals or those made by superiors who had to be encountered and obeyed on a daily basis.

#### *Lack of provision for menstruation on board*

In other ways women seafarers were also made to feel that the shipboard space was a male one with little room for them or their needs. One aspect of women seafarers' experiences of life on board stood out as remarkable in relation to the denial of their requirements. Even in companies where women had a long-established, albeit minority, presence participants described how there was inadequate provision made for menstruation on board. This took two predominant forms. The vast majority of participants described the lack of provision of menstrual products (sanitary towels, tampons etc) on board and every single participant working on a cargo vessel described inadequate provision for the disposal of sanitary waste (see Figure 2). This reinforced the message that *this is a male space and women's needs are not catered for*.

Figure 2: Lack of provision for menstruation on board

We have a lot of girls now onboard but those things [related to menstruation] really [...] they never think about it because yes, you're right we need to get, **we need to bring our own** and we dispose of it in our own way, **no special bin** or special way of how you dump it. So, **nothing**. (Nicola, Rating, Asia)

'No medical locker has any medicines for your period cramps, **no sanitary napkins**. You would have to carry enough for six more months. So that was difficult. Your personal effects for six months could be dwindling already and add sanitary napkins to that. If you ran out of them, you need to rush to some malls somewhere to just you know take off something from the shelves. [...] If you can't go ashore you have to ask somebody for help which is even worse. Because this is a guy who doesn't understand anything about sanitary napkins, buying sanitary napkins. There is not many who will help you with that. So yeah that was difficult. Also, **how do you throw that?'** (Rosa, Officer, Asia)

**There is no facilities** something like that onboard ships [...] in my three companies there are no facilities on board ships like that or sanitary area. So I just carefully wrap it with too much tape. Also, my sanitary pads, **I get it for the whole contract**. I bought it from Philippines and I bring it onboard that's why **my luggage is always bulky** when I go onboard. It's full of sanitary pads. My contract is 9 months plus or minus one. It depends. But sometimes I have 12 months contract because of this pandemic before. (Lynne, Officer, Asia)

**Never**. Bonded store, napkins, no. **There's chips, there's snacks, there's drink**. There's a lot of other things. **No not sanitary napkins**. (Rosa, Officer, Asia)

They should tell them, it's part of the slop chest if you have a woman onboard. Sometimes you have, but usually carry like 6 months. If you have nine months, so...you need to bring 9 month's supply. **All our luggage is full of sanitary napkin**. (Susan, Officer, Asia)

No, umm...**we never had sanitary supplies**, we were told at college to take everything you need for 4 months, 6 months. (Emily, Officer, European)



Women found it difficult to broach the topic of sanitary product provision and disposal with male colleagues. Furthermore, when some plucked up the courage to do so, their concerns were brushed off as though they were insignificant. The underlying message conveyed by such lack of consideration by both male seafarers and the companies which employ women seafarers, is that 'you have chosen to come on board into this male space so YOU must adapt and sort out your problems for yourselves'. One woman described how her captain had simply laughed when she suggested that he might arrange for the slop chest to contain sanitary products, she said:

Actually, I brought it up in my last contract, because we are two females onboard so I told my captain, he was also Panamanian. I said captain maybe next time you will have in the slop chest, sanitary napkin because you have two females onboard. And then he was just laughing. (Ethel, Officer, Asia)

Another had brought it up at meetings and been met with an encouraging response. However, this had never come to anything despite the fact that she had stayed with the same company for a long period of time. She described how:

There's no sanitary products in the medical locker which to me has always been a bit weird because, especially on the survey ships where there are more women on board for the marine crew could end up potentially boarding for a month and then staying for three months and is the same with where I am now where I board to do an eight week stint and end up doing 16 weeks. So having done this for the last 14 years I make sure that all those products that I take enough to cover that in case I can't get the shops or anything. Not to have them in the medical locker, doesn't make sense but whenever I've suggested it in meetings they've all always nodded their heads and said it's a good idea but it's never actually taken anything any further. (Rowna, Officer, European)

Provision was a significant problem, but it was the disposal of sanitary products which caused women the most distress. None of our participants described sailing on a vessel with adequate sanitary disposal facilities or protocols in place. At best, bins were provided without any provision for emptying (including from public spaces of the vessel which might be used by shore-side personnel) or seafarers were told to dispose of sanitary waste in with plastic waste on board. This caused women embarrassment and sometimes humiliation adding to their sense of isolation and difference. One participant described how she realised that the general waste was sorted by the bosun making her uncomfortable about including sanitary products in her general garbage bin. She confided that:

My biggest problem was to always how to get rid of sanitary towels and things because all the rubbish got sorted through and I remember realising that like the bosun actually went through each bin bag and sort it out. That's plastic, that's paper, that's...so yeah there wasn't...And even more recently on sort of more normal ships [ferries], I still haven't had any and I had to ask you know. (Emily, Officer, European)

Another echoed her concerns about garbage segregation by other members of the crew describing how she had heard of male crew members finding and making remarks and jokes about sanitary waste disposed of by female colleagues. She explained that:

If we are at long voyage they separate the garbage, and that makes me very conscious because what if they might see my sanitary napkins and then they might laugh at me, and I actually ask some seafarer bloggers how do they dispose sanitary napkins because I just, I think I need to tell this story, I will not just discuss me but there was this issue that [another seafarer] she put it on the garbage and they laughed at her, so sometimes she throws her

sanitary napkins after [off the ship into the sea], if they are miles away, but I think that's not very environmentally [friendly]. (Gemma, Rating, Asia)

Perhaps the most uncomfortable account was provided by a participant who described being interrogated at a meeting in front of all her male colleagues about how she was disposing of her sanitary products. To compound the humiliation the messman was asked to confirm to the meeting that he had seen her waste collected in her cabin so as to endorse her account that she was not responsible for a blockage in the sewage system. She described how:

It was part of the meeting too. Like if there are some troubles in the pipes, so they ask the girls, 'how do you throw your pads, do you flush it?' 'No, it's not good to flush or it's wrong to flush it in the toilet'. So, [I told them] 'I put it in my own trash can'. [They asked] 'Where?'. I said, 'of course I don't display it. It's hidden in the bathroom or somewhere'. They ask the messman too, during the meeting they are very open. 'Have you seen it?, You have any problems?' [He told them] 'Sir, I've been seeing it.' (Susan, Officer, Asia)

The impact of this kind of insensitive behaviour is likely to put off some women, who have experienced similar events, from returning to sea. For others, it just adds to their sense of alienation and vulnerability on board. Overall, the lack of provision for sanitary products and their disposal is a major source of additional stress and anxiety for women seafarers. Many see menstruation as a taboo subject and seek to maintain privacy and secrecy with regard to their own periods on board. This is made extremely challenging in a context where there is no provision of sanitary products should they require them, and no adequate means for the disposal of sanitary waste.

One further aspect of shipboard life that emphasises to women that they are living in a male space where they should adapt to male norms and where they should not expect any concessions, concerns the viewing of pornography and the telling of rude jokes. On the whole participants understood their male colleagues desire to watch pornography, but it did cause them to isolate themselves and stay away from the crew mess leading to greater possibilities that they would feel lonely and 'different'. One seafarer described how she wanted to blend in with the crew and therefore tried her best not to let their pornography upset her. However, it was clear in her account that it did trouble her but that it was something she simply had to cut herself off from to ensure her survival. She explained that:

Sometimes, [...] the crew decide to watch this prohibited videos on board. So of course I have to isolate myself because of my gender, basically, we're not the same. So I mean, that's part of in Filipino terms, delicadeza, sort of. And I understand that also because they are men. And most of my colleagues are men. So if they have these, they have this feeling that they want to watch those videos in public and they will be in group then I just have to set myself apart from that moment. But those were just of it, oftentimes, very oftentimes. [...] I just think that men are always men, even if those men were already family men even if those men have already partners, they are still fond of watching those stuffs. Maybe because they're just bored because during that time, there is no internet yet on board. No internet, not much stuff in the recreation [...] I just, I tried to, I just tried to control [...] myself. I learned to not let all stuffs get in my skin and I learned not to be bothered by other businesses around me. So, I think it's part of my survival mode in my profession I am with, because I decided to get in the profession, so I need to blend for me to survive. (Mira, Officer, Asia)

While pornography was largely viewed in private or at specific times on board, the telling of 'dirty' jokes was more pervasive. Sexual jokes were something that many women seafarers tried to accept

on board, but it was clear from some accounts that they made women highly aware of their own vulnerability. The jokes made their male colleagues' sexualised views of women manifest, which made women seafarers acutely aware of their own exposure to the male gaze on board and to being seen as a sex object or a focus of male desire. One participant demonstrated this in describing how she felt obliged to listen to rude jokes told by her colleagues but that she drew the line at physical harassment. She explained:

They joke a lot about sexual things. But I just laugh it off and then I will make sure that they are aware that I don't like it. They cannot do the things that they want to do to me. They can joke about it, I can understand that. I can take it as a joke unless you touch me so every time that they will approach with me with that intent, I will make sure that if you touch me, I will definitely let the company know that you touched me and we are gonna both lose our jobs so you better keep your hands on yourself. [...] Unless you say it straight in their faces that you are not liking what they are doing or if you're gonna keep it to yourself that they are too... below the belt or things that you don't like, they will just do it repeatedly unless you say no. Unless they stop it they would do it as a joke but personally you are hurt.[...] By the time I realise that I need to voice out, I just say that no you cannot touch. We are joking, yeah we are teasing, but no touching. 'No touching, if you touch me, you're gonna lose your job.' (Sandra, Rating, Asia)

When women indicated to colleagues that they were uncomfortable with dirty jokes they were often mocked and made to feel as if they were outsiders without a proper seafarer's sense of humour. One participant explained:

He started joking green jokes and then I tried to ask him, 'sir, sometimes your joke is not in timing.' For him, it's just a joke. But others can take it as rude. I am a woman. I understand that these are for boys only but that time there are just the two of us. I told him, 'Maybe you forgot that I am a female'. 'Sir, there are times when you have to say your joke in a right place or...but I am not open to that.' I just avoid that. So, he just tried to laugh and he took it as me having a bad attitude. I understand him on that. Then the other day, the second time he said the same kind of joke, still green joke and it's too malicious. [...] And then you have to be assertive onboard, you have to voice out things that you need, like that, because it's really hard. But I can gain respect out of that, by telling them what are the things you are not comfortable with. So at least...But the next day, he is still joking. He said, 'okay we will do the joking later because Jen is here.' (Jen officer Asia).

In such ways, joking and the viewing of pornography serve to set women seafarers apart on board, to make them feel that they are present in a male space where things that are usually regarded as unacceptable in a shore-based, mixed gender, working environment are permissible and must be accepted without complaint. This frequently leaves women feeling uncomfortable and may result in them feeling a heightened sense of vulnerability. It serves to reinforce feelings of isolation and alienation amongst some women on board.

#### *Lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)*

It was not only in the personal and social spheres that women were made acutely aware of the differences between themselves and others on board. In relation to the safe conduct of their work they also experienced exclusion. It was common for women to describe a lack of appropriate PPE on board, designed to fit them. Given the adherence by many companies to a strong corporate rhetoric

relating to the conduct of safe ship operations such oversight was as surprising as it was alienating. One seafarer expressed her irritation thus:

The size is too big, it's men's size, what do I expect? Actually the uniform that I have, the sleeves is very tall .. it's so long, I have to make adjustment. Even the shoes is either too big or too small. I don't know, the female size is different when it comes to clothes, shoes, they are different. So, I have blisters on my feet on the first few months that I used the shoes that they provide cause it's not really the exact same size for me. (Sandra, rating, Asia)

Another went into considerable detail in order to get her message across. In doing so she revealed her frustration with her company, pointing out that she had brought the matter up many times and highlighting the hypocrisy of the company which on the one hand espoused the highest standards of health and safety but on the other placed her in a situation where if she wanted to be safe herself, she had to purchase all of her own PPE. She said:

There is a huge, huge problem, which I bring up with everyone that I meet, is PPE [...] because girls are generally smaller, there's nothing on board for women, [...] there's never any PPE that's my size on board. Nothing fits me, and it's a huge problem, because you usually go on board and get your PPE there, and I'd have to take all of mine. And then there's the issue of buying it at home and then expensing it and getting stuff that they actually allow me to wear. And then the stuff that I can't really buy at home, like company specific, like waterproof boots for [...] ballast tanks or whatever, so it's a huge problem that I think you definitely need to look at. Because I'm a size six glove, and on board, they only have size sevens, which is the lowest. They do do a size six, and I asked the Chief, I said 'can you get them, do they exist'? And he said 'they do exist, but they're \$25 each and you have to order a minimum of 10, I don't want to spend \$250 on gloves, just for you'. And I said, well you know, 'how many billions of dollars are [name of company] making, it's a lot of money'? And he didn't want to order gloves specific for me, when with [name of company], safety is a huge thing, with everybody, it's just safety, safety, safety. And he didn't want to spend \$250 on gloves that would actually make being able to work efficiently.

The failure to provide PPE in women's sizes can be understood as a form of discrimination. However, women also had to contend with discrimination in other forms such as in relation to promotion and training.

## Experiencing discrimination

### Slow promotion

Not only were women made to feel very different on board, but some women also experienced having their gender count against them in relation to promotion. Such discrimination is not always easy to pin down. However, in some cases it appeared to be pretty clear cut. For example, one woman who had been 'acting up' in the rank above her standard grade for several contracts was overlooked when a permanent position arose in her company. She explained that:

They'd [the person who got the job] never acted up like I had, or done any cargo work as Mate. I've certainly been in the company longer, but I don't necessarily see that as a reason to be promoted but we, well... We are similar, but the other two [...] had things that, well one of them had failed a drug and alcohol in the past, the same one had been done for

bullying in the past, and the other one had also had some incident where he'd slandered off one of the Superintendents and you just think with all that history and there's me, working hard, straight and that, and yet the other two get through. It just seemed a little bit unfair. [My friend in the company] she said, 'okay, if you can't get promoted, what chance does it give the rest of us'. That made me feel worse because I should have maybe taken it further. I don't know, I didn't know where to turn to for advice on that. How can you prove that you didn't get the job because you were female, [...] Well, because I didn't get it then you re-evaluate the whole career at sea. I've done the Mate's job, so I've been there, done that, I've got the t-shirt kind of thing, and maybe I'm thinking what's next. Just because I haven't got the permanent job, in my head I know I'm able to do that job, for my particular company anyway, quite successfully. Currently, now, just this last couple of weeks I've just volunteered to work in the office because, as I mentioned before, the ship management, [name of company] have just taken over and they haven't got any superintendents, they've all quit. I saw a bit of a gap in the market, and I thought I'll just volunteer to the office just to see what that's like, working ashore, but I'm still very much split whether I want to stay at sea or come ashore. I think what's making me think to come ashore is I didn't get that job. If I'd got the job, would I be happily sailing around as Mate. Really, maybe I should try another company, a different ship type, and see how that looks. [...] I do feel a bit bitter, I think not because I didn't get the job, but because of the two people that did. One of them is a bit of a bully and he was the one that said, on the previous occasion that he would quit if I got the job. I've been on trips with him and yes, he's not a particularly nice person, but other people get on with him so not necessarily everybody but it's just, it's just a bit of a bitter pill to swallow sometimes. (Polly, Officer, European)

### *Training*

Women also described the ways in which the training which they were offered on board was impacted by their gender. Eight participants talked about having experienced **some** good training during their cadetships, three were European, one American and four Asian.

One participant shared a positive experience of sailing on a vessel with British officers. She explained this in terms of cultural differences relating to gender norms which impacted positively on the way she was treated. She said:

I think that's the good side of a that nationality, British nationality, they treat girls like equal to men, boys. So, I didn't receive any special...like oh you're a girl I will give you, this is your job, no, they are not like that which is I like it because there is not any discrimination, 'oh this cadet is a Filipina so we will treat her like more special than cadets which are boys, so I gained more confidence on that ship. (Ethel, Officer, Asia)

Participants felt positive about training situations when they felt they were treated in the same way as male cadets. An American cadet joined her second vessel with a crew who were all new to the ship. As a result, she felt that she learnt a huge amount because she was in a situation when everyone on board was investigating different aspects of the vessel operation and sharing their knowledge with each other. This experience of everyone learning together was followed by two more positive shipboard experiences as a cadet where she felt she was treated just as a male cadet would be. She described how:

On the second vessel I got really good training, just because of the situation. Like a new ship to us so we had to really figure everything out together. So, I was along for the ride with

everyone, like everyone's learning. That was awesome. I learned so much on that ship, it was incredible. And, then after my third ship they were like wow, you know a lot, because I had just come off that ship. So, the training on the other two ships were the same as a male would get I would say. (Karina, Officer, America)

However, the majority of women described some training experiences which were negatively impacted by gender (NB some people described both positive and negative experiences varying by ship and with the individual personalities they encountered). It was surprisingly common for female cadets to feel frustrated because once they were on board they were treated differently to male colleagues and were over-protected by senior officers. This got in the way of their learning and often caused them to be bored and confined to paperwork tasks or tasks which would not be particularly relevant to their future careers as seafarers. One officer described how as a cadet her work experience had been seriously restricted by an over-cautious captain who treated her as fragile. She described how:

At first, I was permitted only to be inside of the accommodation and go outside, if anytime, only to observe not to actually to participate which was not very good for my training. You need to learn the best way [...] [I was] Very frustrated. I remember very clearly, how many times I spoke about it with my colleagues. I was very frustrated because I felt I was being treated like I was made of glass. While in some situations you can consider it nice as taking care of me. In a professional environment, I felt it more insulting to my capabilities. For context, I am not a slight person, I am well-built, I have a lot of physical strength as well. Just by looking at me you couldn't think that the slightest wind will blow me over. I have the strength, it is visible and I have the competency to work and it is visible after sometime with me in a professional environment. So, I felt it as an insult to me and my capabilities that I was not allowed to go and do something which I knew perfectly well I can do safely. So yeah, it was very frustrating and insulting with how much time it took me to be allowed to really fulfil my training requirements. (Maritza, Officer, Europe)

Feelings of frustration were quite commonly described by participants who experienced being confined to paperwork and administration rather than being allowed to access the hands-on experience which they needed. One engine cadet described being given paperwork to take care of for the engine department but also being commandeered by the deck department to undertake paperwork for them. She felt this was unreasonable but had no idea what she should or could do about it. She told us:

I did quite a lot of permits, so that's ... I'm not sure how familiar you are with the sector, so I did all the permits for everyone, and I did mainly like filing and writing the logbook and stuff, which yes it is important to know, but it was a very staying in the control room, paperwork side of the job. [...] And then there was this Chief Officer as well, so I wasn't underneath the Chief Officer, I was supposed to be under the Chief Engineer, and the Chief Officer always used to take me up<sup>1</sup> most days and get me to do tasks for him, and quite a lot of people on board noticed the way he was with me. But no one would say anything, because he was Chief Officer, and he would often just take me to go and do things in his office, which were completely nothing to do with what I was supposed to be learning. So that was mainly my tasks on board, while I was there. [...] I was a first ship cadet, so I genuinely didn't know anything. Which I regret now, because now I've got a lot more experience, I know that that

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<sup>1</sup> NB The engine room is down at the bottom of the vessel below the deck and navigation spaces.

shouldn't have been how it played out. But at the time I wasn't very aware that that was not common for engineer cadets even though it felt wrong, I didn't know necessarily what to do, or how to go about it. (Arni, Officer, Europe)

Another participant had similar experiences. She described being asked to make the coffee for the pilot and being kept away from manual work on deck. She was able to compare her experiences with one of her male counterparts and as a result she eventually went to the captain to ask for more access to training on deck. She explained:

I would say I was treated very differently [...] I am on the bridge making pilot's coffee most of the time, not going to the station and experiencing that work which I would supervise myself as an officer when I come back at sea after getting the qualification. Eventually, I had to go to the master and request that I be sent on the deck, be given the regular deck jobs which cadet will get. Cause I remember all I did for a month was take soundings of the tank. And then do the paperwork for the chief mate, ballast paper record, ballast water record and things like that. And stay inside the office, not on the deck much. Whereas my other friend, batchmate was sent on the deck, sent to the stations, never make coffee for pilots during stations and like that. [...] Yeah, a male. Apparently, we (women) are seen as good coffeemakers for pilots on the bridge. (Rosa, Officer, Asia)

One of the things that all of the participants seemed to have in common was a strong desire to be at sea and to succeed in their chosen careers. In this context it was particularly frustrating for them to find they were being 'sheltered' from the training they needed and wanted. On her first ship, an officer who went on to have very good subsequent training experiences, told how she resented being forced to sit around a lot on board, rather than being offered the opportunity to acquire hands on experience. She described how:

Sometimes they'd have me clean things in the office space, and a lot of times they would just have me sit and watch, like the ballasting computer. [...] I was frustrated because [...] they did make me sit around a lot. And, when I went and I asked, while I was sitting there, if I could work on my projects at the same time, and I got yelled at, so, I was frustrated because I felt like I wasn't really learning much, and I couldn't spend the time on my projects. So, that was probably the most frustrating piece of it. [...] I was just mostly frustrated that I didn't feel I was learning very much at the time. [...] at some point I said that I didn't like sitting around and I wanted to work, and he got mad about that too. And, he said something like I've been trying to be so nice to you, and you have no ... you're not very grateful or something. And, I was just trying to explain that I want to work, I don't want to sit around and have an easy time. [...] This was the chief mate. (Karina, Officer, America)

Another described similar treatment when she said:

That's just how they see me, just a woman, who's just holding the ballpen or just papers yeah. There are times too at work when they will say, 'you just go there and we will be the one to work on it.' And me as a cadet, I have to observe a lot, I have to learn because I am aiming to be an officer someday. Now they keep on pushing me, just stay there and do this, leave this to us because this is technical. Especially in our department, engineers have a lot of technical matters to do so they will push me not to be there but be somewhere else. So, I asked my chief engineer and he's not saying but he doesn't want me to work downstairs, what he wants is just for me to do paperwork. (Jen, cadet, Asia)

Participants provided many examples of discrimination as cadets, but they also encountered discrimination at later stages of their careers. One officer who was keen to gain promotion asked her chief officer if she could shadow him to learn from watching him undertake more senior tasks. His response was to assign her some paper shredding. She explained:

I asked the chief officer once, if I could shadow him on a couple of his jobs so that I could get some experience and initially was greeted with enthusiasm and then was given some shredding to do which I didn't think I needed much training on that so that was the end of that training experience [...] he was very chauvinistic [...] You know I was trying to progress and meet performance targets on my performance development review and was being stopped. (Rowna, Officer, Europe)

In the face of these experiences, participants had felt frustrated, bored, and under-valued. With few people to discuss the situation with, most gritted their teeth and tried to ride out the negative times associated with their contracts.

### Needing to prove oneself

A common response to discrimination was described as determination to succeed by many participants. One of the areas where there was an overwhelming consensus related to a shared feeling of needing to prove themselves. This led women to spend less time relaxing than they could have and in general terms to 'work their socks off'.

This need to prove themselves was not just confined to cadets or neophyte seafarers. Many participants described feeling that each time they moved company, or ship, they needed to make a great effort to demonstrate their worth and prove that they were good at their job. A participant described how:

We have to prove over and over again to our colleagues that we are competent and that we want to work here and that takes a lot of dedication to your job. This, I think, also means that women who work at sea are really... do want to work there. Because it is not the case that they will just start and continue even if they do not really enjoy the job, cause with how much we had to work hard to prove our worth it takes a really dedicated person to continue such a career so for sure this dedication is a must for a successful career at sea. (Maritza Officer Europe)

Women were often made aware of the need to prove themselves as a result of the behaviour of their male colleagues. Many described situations in which they realised that they were not trusted in relation to their ability to work on board. Such lack of trust was demeaning for women seafarers. One eventually took her senior officer to task. She explained how:

He was following me personally. Even on very simple jobs, he would follow me and check if I would, if I was doing the right thing. Yeah. [...] It was uncomfortable, and it was insulting. I don't know if I used the right word but that is what I told him, actually. After I've had enough I told him, 'you know Second<sup>2</sup>, every time you come to me you are insulting me.' This is what I told him, and he became furious but after some time he calmed down. Actually, his wife talked to him, he told us that his wife talked to him and told him that he is not supposed to

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<sup>2</sup> It is common for seafarers to be referred to by rank 'Chief', or 'Second' for example, rather than by name whilst on board.



do this. So yeah we made peace. [...] after, I mean, after a long time and I had enough and I heard a lot of insulting comments from him then finally I had to talk. (Paula, Officer, Asia)

Others were reluctant to be so direct and they tried alternative approaches which they hoped would positively impact on their situations. In many cases these involved undertaking extra duties and/or working longer hours. This response was common to many participants regardless of the position or the department that they worked in. One woman who worked in the galley explained the situation as follows:

‘Actually, they look down on me. Sometimes because I am a female here, I need to prove that I deserve to be here, and I need to work hard so that they’ll acknowledge my existence here. [...] I am entering the world of men, you know, there’s a feeling that they will make you feel that you’re not “belong” to their world. [...] the only thing I learned here is that if I want to be with them, on the same stage with them, I need to prove myself that I’m worthy to be here. It makes me stronger than I am in my previous work. [...] things that I did to make them believe that I deserve to be there. I do extra job through...working hours is 6am to 6pm, sometimes I would go to work by 5am to prepare them breakfast or make some other dessert or make lunch and I also cook. That time I was not supposed to cook, the job specifics that I had is just to work as an assistant, an assistant to the cook. I just need to give things to the cook to work on. But since I need to prove myself that I am here to work. I was actually thankful for my chief cook that time because he allowed me to cook, he allowed me to bake, he allowed me to do the things that... to show my skills and capability, to be a better person. That’s why maybe there are a few of them are like ‘yeah, she’s into the job, she’s doing right.’ We don’t have any other options but to accept her. (Sandra, Rating, Aisa)

In another example an officer succinctly echoed her resolve. She described how:

I need to prove to them I can do the job even if a woman, it doesn’t matter if I’m a woman. Double time, if the men can do 100%, you make it 200%. (Hilda, Officer, Asia)

Participants generally felt that the need to prove themselves remained with them throughout their careers. As they climbed the ranks, they remained aware of how some seafarers would continue to question their abilities and promotions regardless of their position or experience. One described how:

That feeling doesn’t really disappear until now, that you have to constantly prove yourself. It is just a change of level. Before it’s regarding the physical job, now that you are going up the rank, they will say that you got promoted because you are only a woman. So, there is always the need to constantly prove yourself, that I was able to do this because I worked hard to learn it, I worked hard to earn it. It’s like that. (Trina, Officer, Asia)

Not only did women feel they needed to prove themselves with every new contract and vessel, but they also felt they had to prove themselves when there were crew changes on board. This was understandably exhausting, but some women described how the upside of the situation was that their efforts ultimately resulted in them becoming better seafarers. One described this phenomenon as she explained that she disliked the need to prove herself repeatedly to colleagues. She told us:

I think it’s just show them that you can do the job, and I know you do have to work a little bit harder, you have to read the manuals a lot more, and show that you do in fact know the information. Whereas other people might ... I think just if you show them that you’re completely capable of what you can do, once they know, they won’t think less of you

anymore. [...] I don't really like it, because it means every time someone new joins, you have to prove yourself again, which I hate doing. But I do think it's, if you just get on with your job, and show that you can do it as well as anybody else, or maybe better, then I think that will be best for you, because you'll become a better Engineer, or a Deck Officer, or whatever you are. And it'll also show them that actually you're completely capable as anyone else to do this job. (Czarina, Officer, Europe)

The prejudice that many women encountered tended to set them apart from male colleagues. In some cases, their resolve to demonstrate that they were capable of their jobs, resulted in a practice of self-isolation. This allowed them to preserve their strength, in order to prove their capacity for hard work, and it also distanced them from the negative attitudes and comments of prejudiced colleagues, protecting them against the kind of emotional harm that might otherwise arise. One seafarer explained that:

You feel like they don't want you or they don't give you a job or jobs much because they are thinking because you are a girl you cannot do it [...] I had a few ships, not just once but you know, a few ships that they really underestimated me because I'm a girl and I have less, maybe they think I have less energy and I cannot compare with the boys type thing. So, for me really, I just stop this, I just put my ears close, my eyes close, and just pretend nothing, if they don't want me after work I go to my bed, then work, go to my bed, nothing, but I don't bond with them, I distance myself because that's the only way you can do it, I can do it and survive. Actually, nothing helps me in those times, sometimes the ship's crew watch movies, music or call to my family but in everyday life I just ignore it, I'm ignoring it but I did my best to let them see that I can do it, even though at the back of their mind they're doubting me and all that. I work my ass so much so that they can never underestimate me and see who really I am, so far that's the only thing I do in times like that, times I have onboard because we cannot please all of the people so just ignore it and let them see how, let them see how I work and then judge me afterwards. (Nicola, Rating, Asia)

Where women had overcome discrimination and prejudice, they sometimes found themselves reluctant to venture out into new situations where they would have to deal with all the difficulties of being accepted in their roles, once again. This could act as a brake on their career progression. In several cases women described facing slower progression than male colleagues. However, they nevertheless felt reluctant to leave their organisations to look for promotion elsewhere because they were daunted by having to repeat the whole process of acceptance once again. One explained that:

I have been where I am now for years and I have proved myself and I am looking at moving now just because of not progressing where I should be I'm about to sit my masters exam so need to be climbing the ranks really and that is one fear that I know that when I go somewhere well it's not a fear but I get a feeling a feeling of dread that I have got to go somewhere else and prove myself worthy of doing the job [...] again... (Rowna, Officer, Europe)

### Feeling under spotlight (standing out)

Discrimination and prejudice occurred in a context where women seafarers were present in very small numbers on board. As such they were often regarded, by male counterparts, as something of a novelty. Not only was their work subject to scrutiny but their whole personality came under a

spotlight each time they boarded a vessel. One explained how this could create a situation where women 'couldn't win'. She explained:

In safety meetings if you speak something they say you are an attention-seeker, she wants to be saying something, she wants to be talking all the time because she's a woman and things like that. If you're not talking, oh she is not paying attention, she is least bothered, you know taking part in the team. So, either way something bad. (Rosa, Officer, Asia)

Far from being attention seekers many of our participants volunteered the information that they disliked being under a spotlight whilst on board. One described relief at joining a company that was relatively used to employing female seafarers on board. She told us:

I transferred to another company because after that first [negative] experience I am not going back there so when I came to another company they said, this company, the way they treat female seafarers is they accept them well and they support them well. So, okay I will go to this company and it did not disappoint, because when I came there I didn't feel any special attention. It's like normal. (Paula, Officer, Asia)

Another described how she desperately wanted to blend in during the early years of her career and disliked the occasions where attention was drawn to her being an unusual addition on board. She explained that:

I think I just wanted to fit in. I didn't like I guess being the odd one out, or being pointed out, and give you an example now that I'm aware of it. I don't like it when there's one captain and a meeting who says 'right gents and lady' they point it out and point to me all the time where some people quite like that to be included for me personally I didn't like being excluded by having to be pointed out. I'm just at work gender isn't an issue for me I don't go around thinking about gender I just want to go to work and do my job and go home. (Rowna, Officer, Europe)

Overall, our participants felt that they received a great deal of unwarranted scrutiny and attention from their colleagues, as workers. This was challenging in itself, leading them to feel pressured to work harder than anyone else and to show that they were worthy of a place in their male dominated workspaces. It could also lead women to self-isolate in order to protect themselves from the negative narratives of prejudiced co-workers.

There were, however, other forms of unwanted attention that women sought to avoid, and which could also lead them to practice self-isolation on board. Sexual harassment produced different degrees of fear amongst women seafarers but a common strategy for survival was to absent themselves from the few social activities which took place on board. The penultimate section of our findings on the experiences of women seafarers explains and describes some of the consequences for women of sexual harassment on board.

## Feeling afraid

### *Sexual harassment*

Cargo ships may sail many miles from shore and the adage that 'worse things happen at sea' is borne out in the experiences of seafarers who are unfortunate enough to become the target of violence, bullying and harassment whilst on board.

For women seafarers, sexual harassment was a relatively commonplace and potentially traumatising event. Most frequently, harassment involved unwanted touching and kissing of women seafarers' hands, faces, and 'private parts'. It could be inflicted upon them by senior officers but it was also a relatively common feature of interactions with equals and subordinates. Women described facing a considerable dilemma in instances where such behaviours arose. They wished to prevent the re-occurrence of abhorrent behaviours, but they were often reluctant to complain about incidents either because they felt sorry for the perpetrators and for their families who depended on them working on board, or because they feared that they would not be taken seriously, would not be listened to, or would actually face disciplinary action themselves. One woman described how in her younger days she had decided not to report a colleague who had very clearly overstepped the mark because of concerns about his family. She told us:

So, we came back from a bar. The second officer sat next to me, and he put his arm around me, and he started playing with my ear and I just sort of froze and thought 'what's he doing?' Then when we got back to the ship, I went to my cabin and there was a knock on the door. So, I opened it and he came straight in and stuck his tongue in my mouth. In my mind, that was really clear, I haven't done anything to ask for that...like I haven't... But even then I didn't say anything to anyone because I didn't want to get him in trouble. I don't know why. Right now, I would. Back then I didn't want to...you think of these people's family back home and stuff...do you want to get them fired because they were drunk and tried to kiss you. (Emily, Officer, Europe)

Another described multiple reasons for not complaining about the unacceptable behaviour of some colleagues and seniors. They included a perception that complaining would not achieve anything, that complaining is a sign of weakness, and that complaining can result in retaliation of a violent and even murderous kind. She described several incidents where she did not complain as follows:

It is low-key physical harassment like they will just grab my hand, hold me. [...] So, I could not raise that concern to the senior officer because even if I do that it will be a useless complaint. They will not do anything about it [...] Because I am the type of person who does not complain as long as I can tolerate it. So, I did not complain about it, I did not. If you are a woman in the maritime industry, complaining is a sign of weakness. [...] Yeah, during that time I feel like my complaint will become useless if I'll pursue it. So, I just kept it to myself. I told myself that I have to be strong, that whatever you know will come in that 12-month contract, I would have to endure it and finish my contract safely. But because there are lots of seafarers of neophytes who lost their lives at sea, you know, committed suicide or pushed in the middle of the ocean. I don't want that to happen to me, so I just kept my complaints to myself. Complaining is a sign of weakness, that's for me. I don't know for others [...] It was during a party. Like it was during our Christmas party. Everyone got drunk, he is a Muslim and then he grabbed me, and I really got scared. So, what I did is that I did not finish the party, I went to my cabin and lock it and I just sat there. Yeah, then I resumed my... [...] I did not tell anybody, no. I didn't tell anybody about it because they can complain about, I did not complain about it. (Matilde, Officer, Asia)

Another described a very unwelcome incident at the hands of an acknowledged 'bully'. Despite her clear disgust at the events, she did not make a complaint about the behaviour of the seafarer concerned because he pleaded with her not to. She explained:

There was another one who cornered me into this pantry. I was just putting my plate and he came and I couldn't go out, he was asking for a kiss or to be touched and he was showing me

his private parts already. Also, that time, I didn't do anything violent. I'm just, 'please can you let me pass, I will shout if you don't let me pass.' I was lucky that somebody came in, so we heard some noise that somebody came in, so he let me pass. [...] he is one of the three bullies [...] He let me pass and then I was running to my cabin. But he was following me, 'Maiden, maiden, don't tell anybody about it!' So, I didn't tell anybody about it. (Paula, Officer, Asia)

Sometimes the issues were complicated by the fact that it was a senior officer perpetrating the abusive behaviour. In such cases, women would sometimes try to speak up at the time of the incident, but they would rarely report it. In offering us examples of two different incidents one seafarer explained how she had become better at speaking up over time. When she felt unable to do so she found herself extremely upset and isolated:

The Chief Engineer, he kept on calling me for some tutorials how to manage the paperwork and the other is yeah. And he was, one time he told me he is very stressed because we just took the ship from another management and maybe I could help him. And I said how? He said, maybe we can watch movies from my cabin or some massage. Right away, [...]. [laughs] I told him, 'you know I can help you with your job-related matters but not with your personal life.' That courage to speak up, I didn't have before when I came onboard. So, the previous time was with the captain, he kept on coming when I was using the public computer. He kept on coming and then eventually he was taking my photo. 'Can I take your photo, I would just show my wife?' I said, 'okay' Then the next time again, 'oh, your cheeks are good, it is good for kissing.' Then he eventually leaned to kiss my hair. That time I went back to my cabin and cried. (Paula, officer, Asia)

Another described an incident where she spoke up to her senior officer, but she did not report him, despite the fact that he was clearly attempting to take advantage of her vulnerability after a shipboard incident where she had some culpability. She described how:

One day, [...] I think the gangway was squeezed a bit because of the [...] we were in the port. So, [I faced] a lot of questions and all from the officer, the captain and from my chief officer, then suddenly he wanted to talk to me in private, he wanted to talk to me in his cabin. So, I went to his cabin, and we talked about it, he asked me things here and there, but I felt uncomfortable because he is doing something weird and that's not appropriate you know, he just started touching me and I was really afraid at the time because it's my first time that anything, because it's my watch so it's my responsibility. So, he wanted to ask what happened, what went wrong, where were you and all like that but the way he talked to me, the way he wanted to touch me, and he closed the door, so I said why, it was in my mind why would he close the door, why would he want to talk in private, this is not a private case, it should be talked through with all of the guys so that they can hear what happened but still, I went there, he closed the door and we talked but I felt really strange and different. So, he started to just push me down and was touching me but after then I said 'okay, chief, I think this is not good, can we just talk outside', because he started touching me already and I suddenly panicked, no, no, I need to go out you know. (Nicola, Rating, Asia)

The incidents where women felt unable to voice their own objections and/or to complain appeared to lead to traumatic stress which could last well beyond the seafarer concerned's contract. One woman described feeling haunted by her abuser. She said:

He tried to touch me, because while on documentation, so my office, admin office is in front of captain's cabin, so imagine while I'm working, suddenly captain will show up on my, behind me, and try to touch my private parts, something like this [...] I was in trauma for 2-3 years [...] I was in trauma, it's like every time somebody is walking outside my room the only thing that came to my mind was it was captain, every time I was on vacation and then the phone rang, it's like captain, captain is calling again, even I'm in hotel, I'm in resort, and then for three years every time I saw a western guy, European guy, I look at that person as captain. It's like all European guys are same to me. (Hilda, Officer, Asia)

In some cases, the initial harm that was caused by the perpetrator of abuse on board was amplified as a result of the unhelpful responses of other colleagues. One seafarer described her distress at her colleagues' reaction when, as a cadet, she complained to them about the behaviour of a senior officer. Although it is likely that their response was partly a result of their own fear of the officer's authority, their reaction clearly hurt and confused the, then, cadet. She told us:

Also, one senior officer tried to harass me when I'm a cadet. He wants me to get something from the stationery store. Stationery store is where there are bond paper and that one is only adjacent to the room of that senior officer. Then when I go there, he also entered the room and then locked the door then he wanted to kiss me. I said no, I pushed him and then I go to bosun, and I tell them that I will not stay there. He's a senior officer, yeah. This person wants to kiss me, and they don't believe me. Only...they laugh at me only. They said to me, 'it's okay he's still single, he's still single, it's okay to kiss you'. (Lynne, Rating, Asia)

Unfortunately, this was not the only example we uncovered of women seafarers feeling failed by their colleagues on board in the face of an incident of harassment. Lack of support from colleagues could leave women feeling extremely isolated, upset and highly vulnerable. One seafarer described an incident when colleagues actually witnessed the harassment, yet still refrained from supporting her. She described how:

I also have another experience with another crew member onboard, he was an officer and I was ratings that time. So, we went ashore. We went to the bar. And then he was like harassing me. He started kissing me on the side of my ears, like that. I tried to tell him off, but I ended up getting more disappointed, feeling bad because I thought that the other crew who saw what he did to me, but they did not do anything. They just acted like they didn't see it. I slept that night with a knife and a radio on my bedside because I was really scared at that time. I was thinking he might enter my cabin. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

In many cases, however, we found that seafarers were supportive of colleagues who were being harassed on board and some went to great lengths to help them out. One seafarer explained that when she was a cadet she was harassed by the chief officer on her vessel. This was particularly difficult as she shared part of his watch with him. She confided in two officers on board, and they came up with a system for her protection whereby one would go to the bridge for an hour at 06.00 and the other would show up on the bridge at 07.00 until the chief mate's watch was finished at 08.00. In her own words she told us:

He tried to touch me, he tried to kiss me, and because you don't like it, you feel like [...] running [away] every time. So my contract, when he is still on board is like you can't enjoy it, because you know there is somebody outside there who has a bad interest in you.[...] that time I was a cadet. [...] I was on the bridge, because my watch is 6 till 12, chief officer watch is 4 to 8 so I still have two hours to go on duty with him, 6 to 8 I'm on his watch. [...] Knowing

I experience it the only thing that came my mind is I need to finish my contract, no matter what happens, I need to finish my contract, so I have a good relationship with second engineer and third officer so I told him the story, 'the problem is like this, he tried to kiss me, he tried to touch me', so the solution the third mate gave us, third mate will go on the bridge at 7 O' clock, and then second engineer will go to the bridge at 6 to 7 in the morning, so that chief mate can't do anything. (Hilda, officer, Asia)

In another example, crew intervened and then orchestrated an apology from the offender to the woman seafarer who had been harassed. She still seemed disturbed by the incident as she told us:

A new chief engineer in the company who cannot control himself when he is already drunk, [...] so he attempted to sexually harass me. So other crew saw me [...] that I reacted so and then later on , early before my watch he came in the bridge waited for me and when I get inside the bridge, he just directly asked for my forgiveness and I am in front of the crew, including the master, and I just told him that if he will do that again, I said to him that I don't know what will happen, but I just I told him that I didn't like what he did to me last night . So, he must not do that again [...] Yes, he did it. And other crew witnessed that one. [...] They took the chief engineer away from me. And they said you better get off and get inside your cabin. So that was it. And then the party was over because it was spoiled by one person and it was just a new one in the company. [...] It wasn't good, it wasn't good. (Mira, Officer, Asia).

Women described responding to harassment in two different ways. Occasionally they made a formal complaint but most frequently, to simply avoid the problem altogether, many women isolated themselves, particularly on occasions when alcohol was involved. The problem with the latter strategy is that it comes at a cost to the women seafarers who cannot take part in social events because of the risk of becoming embroiled in an unpleasant incident. One woman seafarer described taking care to avoid her male colleagues when they were drinking, she said:

When they are...they are drunk already so sometimes they will touch you, like they are taking a chance at you, but if they are sober they are not like that. Sometimes only. So, I am just careful. All my moves are calculated. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

Another had learned the hard way to avoid trouble, recognising that incidents could have implications for the whole crew on board. She explained that:

Another occasion it was a Saturday afternoon my door was open I was just lying on my bunk watching TV and one of the crew members came and got into bed and said 'what are we watching?'. So he got asked to leave, I ended up having to break up a fight because the rest of them didn't think that was appropriate behaviour so they started on him so then I had to break up the fight.[...] that was probably when I was first qualified basically but yeah I think I've learnt rightly or wrongly to not get involved in some social situations there are some people that, especially when drink is involved, start to become inappropriate and I've learnt to just leave and to exclude myself from, it's better just not to have to deal with it than getting yourself in a situation from a safety point of view. (Rowna, officer, cadet)

There were situations that women seafarers told us about, where they had little choice about being in the presence of a seafarer who was minded to harass them. Sometimes these incidents left them feeling very frightened. One woman described being intimidated by a persistent seafarer while she was in her cabin. Although she was supported by the officers on board, and the seafarer concerned was sent home, she remained afraid of him catching up with her once she was back home because of the intimidating note that he left in his cabin prior to departure. She described how:

It's so creepy because he keeps on knocking on my door, actually it was not right away that he was sent home because our officers, on the first warning they talked to him to clarify things, and then he repeated the situation again and again and then there was the time our captain decided to let the office know and then they decided to send him home because it's like he was disturbed and he doesn't think properly I guess, he cannot work, focussed. I feel a little guilty because as a sea woman, I find it a little guilty because at some part it's because of me [...] Yes but my crew mates told me that it was not my fault.[...] I was really scared and I was scared because he also left a note actually in his cabin, yes and he sent also messages to my co-workers like 'thank you for sending me home, I hope you will be happy', it's so creepy, and I think if I go home to the Philippines at that time maybe he will be somewhere in the airport looking for me [...] Because I think if that was not, if no one took action to it what will happen if we will be with him again on next voyage, or if my captain is not that serious to take action or my office, what will happen to me? Because our voyage is usually months, or maybe if he's here in the Philippines, what can he do, what can he actually do to take revenge, something like that. (Gemma, rating, Asia)

Another seafarer described running from the captain's day room when she felt sexually threatened by him. She described how she woke up to a late phone call from the captain having fallen asleep directly after her shift without going to dinner. At first, she was confused and just did as she was told but she subsequently appreciated the situation and when she had an opportunity, she fled:

So someone is calling me and I didn't notice the time and it was captain's voice, oh ok I thought I was late for the job or for the dinner I don't know, so my mind is not too settled yet because I was, because of the phone ring yes, so I took the phone and then he told me to come to his cabin and ask me, and then I took my coverall because I'm still in my pyjamas so I just took my coverall and then come up to his cabin, and then I noticed the time when I'm already in his cabin, because it's not directly a cabin, it's like an office before his cabin, so I was in his office and then I saw the time, it's almost midnight and I was like what the, why is it almost midnight he's calling me, and then I saw my captain he's wearing only a shirt and he doesn't have nothing on his below. I was shocked and then I was like I need to go out, I need to go out, so, but I'm frozen that time so the only thing that I'm thinking is how can I escape, how can I escape, because the captain is almost 7 footer or, he's very tall, very tall, and I think I'm not sure if he's drunk or what because he's very red, how can I escape, escape, escape, escape. So, and then, suddenly it's like there's a phone ring, so it's like my mind is like, how do you call this, being frozen, I was like 'oh ok I need to go' and then I just told him, 'cap, I need to go', and then I ran, I ran back, I didn't use the elevator anywhere, I took from the staircase to my cabin, and then I was like thinking, something should almost happen that time if I didn't run or I froze for a long time, and then I was panicking already in my cabin, because maybe what if he comes to my room, what if, so I'm already paranoid. (Marni, Rating, Asia)

This feeling of having very little capacity to escape from an individual intent on harassment was commonly experienced and expressed by women seafarers. One rating who didn't want to get on bad terms with her chief engineer aboard on one vessel described accepting his invitation to have a drink with him in his cabin. Having had one drink, he pressed her to accept another, but she did not think it was wise, and made an excuse to leave whilst he pressed her to promise to return. She described hiding in the cupboard of a friend's cabin in order to evade his subsequent search for her. She told us:



The chief engineer was of a different nationality and then there was a party at that time. Then he told me he wants to invite me to his cabin to have a drink so I was already drinking at the party. He told me 'let us have some shots in my cabin, I have vodka', something like that. My thinking was that time, because I was ratings that time, I just want to be in good terms with him because he is my boss. So, I just said yes, let us have one drink. And then he offered me a drink and then he wants to drink more, then I said no, no, no, maybe later. Are you sure, you will come back here? I lied and said 'yes I will come back'. After that I hid [...] He went to each cabin just to find me. [...] Yes, I went to another cabin to hide. Actually at that time there was a messwoman onboard, I hid in her closet so that the chief engineer will not find me. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

It was not exceptional for participants to tell us that they had done ill-judged things at some point in their career. However, at times they seemed to blame themselves too readily for the things that happened to them. More frequently, however, they found themselves blamed by others. In one case, a seafarer described how one of her colleagues entered her cabin without her permission and stole photographs from her phone which she had taken of herself whilst scantily dressed. The seafarer subsequently posted the photos online without making it clear that they were stolen. The woman concerned, was aware of what had happened but did not want to make a complaint. However, once home, she was called into the office to explain herself, with the assumption being that the photos were taken and released with her consent. The incident left her feeling bruised and resentful. She described how:

I finished my contract. I didn't say anything but eventually the company knew about certain things that happened onboard so they called me up to explain. So I told them everything but then when they sent me to this, I think she was the vice-president, so when I came to talk to her I didn't feel any support. She was telling me, 'what were you thinking? You know you are in an environment with men. You are supposed to take care of yourself, be careful.' So...[laughs] yeah, that exactly what happened, she was blaming me. How can you blame someone who is a victim of...when somebody enters your cabin, am I to blame on that? I was like feeling betrayed. (Paula, Officer, Asia)

Even when no blame was apportioned to women seafarers it sometimes remained the case that they were the ones who were expected to change. This was frequently presented to them as 'for your own good'. However, it did seem that in 2022, progress has been made with regard to the repatriation of offending seafarers rather than their victims. This is different to the situation that was described to us when undertaking research of a similar nature in 2002/3 and it is very important as it has the potential to act as a very strong deterrent on board. One such case was described as follows:

One time I was an AB that time, during our duty, I am the AB and he is my third officer. He is talking something you know about sex, about porn and after that he always ah, he became clingy. And so I escape. My duty is 4am to 8am so by 5am I am going to check all of our ballast. I'm going to check and sound the volume of our water ballast. That is my routine for my 4 to 8 duty. And so I actually I need to do that when it is already, there is the sun or in the morning, because of course during 4am to 5am it is still dark outside. But since I feel that something is off with him, I go to the main deck at the earliest possible time so that I can't be with him on our duty. Of course, he did something bad to me. He hugged me and kissed me, and of course, I reported it to the master and immediately the master told him to make a reason to disembark, emergency leave because I also requested not to tell it to the

company since I am the first female cadet. I don't like to have a bad record and to protect other women I just keep it to myself. (Zoe, Officer, Asia)

In this case Zoe was determined to protect her reputation in the company by not reporting the events that had occurred on board. However, there were other more extreme ways in which women seafarers attempted to protect themselves from male colleagues. In many instances they would fabricate locks which meant they could feel safe in their cabins at night. Occasionally, some also resorted to arming themselves in order to physically fend off any unwanted attention.

### *Locking cabins*

Many participants described locking their cabins. Although this may seem quite normal whilst staying in a hotel or in other similar accommodation ashore, at sea the norm is to leave doors unlocked unless a vessel is in port. This demonstrates trust in colleagues and emphasises that the vessel is a home to seafarers, who would not be in the habit of locking their doors at home. Locking cabin doors is also something of a false security measure on board as, in any case, senior officers hold the master keys to all cabins.

Unlike their male colleagues, however, women seafarers had learned that they could not leave their doors open on a trust basis, either while they were within the cabin or outside it. A defensive attitude led them to take steps to ensure that whilst they were sleeping, other seafarers could not gain access to them. In many cases this involved constructing barricades inside rooms or even fabricating locks. Their accounts betrayed a relatively high level of fear and intimidation which they experienced on a routine basis. One seafarer described how:

I also have a double lock inside my cabin, or I put a chair on my door so that if I am sleeping, because the master has the key right and the chief mate has also the key, so I usually put the chair. So that if I will notice that someone is trying to open my door at least I am aware. At least, I am ready to defend myself or bring some recorders for evidence. So, I am usually attentive to that because I usually hear a lot of news about something like that that was done to the female seafarers. (Geraldine, Rating, Asia)

Another woman seafarer had also added a lock to her cabin. She explained that:

My rule that I don't break is you never go anybody else's cabin and you do not let anybody else in your cabin. So that is the rule that I follow, that is in the guidelines, and also that is my sort of safer rule cause once you allow them to go inside your cabin...if you close the door, I just think that something bad will happen. [...] Yes...and if you still don't feel safe, there was once where nothing really happened to me, but I have this woman's intuition so for me since I'm not feeling safe and secure, I add another lock in my cabin. So just in case if someone attempted to do something, so I added a key where only me can have that. (Trina, Officer, Asia)

Adding locks was relatively commonplace and undertaking self-defence courses prior to boarding was also something which several women described doing. One explained that:

Being the only female onboard sailing with men, I really need to protect myself so it's just a habit to me but every time I go onboard, I will always create or fabricate my own double lock [...] I really need to do that even if I am already a chief officer 'cause you can never know these men. I don't know them, so I need to protect myself and I really need to have some

you know sort of you know device that really just ... if somebody goes inside my cabin then I have some self-defence. Something to make me safe. (Ethel, Officer, Asia)

Male colleagues on board also recommended to some women that they should make additional locks for their cabins or at the least keep them locked while they were inside. Sometimes, this was in response to fearful approaches from women themselves as in the following case when a woman talked to the bosun about someone trying to get into her cabin at night. Revealing an acute sense of vulnerability, she described how:

I talked to bosun, I told him that 'last night somebody tried to open my doorknob', he said 'ok we will put double lock tomorrow', and then they put some double lock, and then I think, as far as I remember, one time safety meeting, captain said, respect each other. I don't know if it's because of me because of the other issues on ship, you can't, it's always like, when there's a woman, even you are fully dressed, they look at you as if you are naked. (Hilda, Officer, Asia)

In other cases, male seafarers had picked up that some of their colleagues were behaving inappropriately and they had a quiet word with the woman seafarer concerned to alert her to the need for precautions. One seafarer explained how:

This chief cook told me 'Maiden, are you locking your cabin?' I said, 'no.' 'You should lock your cabin.' But he didn't tell me why. It's because he knew already, he knew already somebody is coming to my cabin. But one time I came, and it is unlocked already. One time I didn't lock it because I was just going to the laundry, when I came back it's already locked. [...] I was in the laundry. And somebody came in. When I came in, he was already there and he started grabbing me and I could have, you know, this is what my friend was telling me, 'you are stupid, you could have screamed or kick him or curse him.' But I just cried and begged for him to go out. Yeah... (Paula, Officer, Asia)

### *Gossip*

Women seafarers invariably fell victim to malicious gossip. We were given countless examples of how gossip about them circulated with only the slightest provocation. As a result, they sought to avoid situations where they were seen to be in the company of any one colleague on a regular basis and/or where they were seen to spend private time with a colleague. This had the unfortunate adverse effect of causing them to be even more isolated on board with all the ramifications this has for wellbeing and mental health. While gossip may seem a relatively harmless feature of everyday life, in the context of working on an overwhelmingly single sex ship it could be corrosive and deeply upsetting for all parties on the receiving end of the gossip. One seafarer told us that she avoided gossip at some social cost. She explained that:

If I spend any amount of time with any single person on board, it's all gossip, it's if I play FIFA with the AB, it's all, oh, they must be up to no good, or sleeping together. It's always that, and I don't think that will change, because unless there's multiple women on board, that it will ... it's just then people start to see, oh actually they're just friends. But I don't really know how that can change, but I mean, I wish it would because it's not very ... you don't feel like you can have friends on board, because it's always the gossip around that, which you don't want on board. (Arni, Officer, Europe)

Others felt very similarly. Rowna told us:

Well I mean I will always be strictly professional on board so it's frustrating that if I'm sitting having a beer with a male colleague alone then there is always, nine times out of ten there will be someone making stupid faces or insinuating that something is going on or something like that which you know is I mean what am I supposed to do just not talk to anyone for fear of gossip. (Rowna, officer, Europe)

While one cadet felt unable to even spend time with male colleagues during collective gatherings at break times. She described how:

These men once you have talked to them, they assume a lot. They assume easily. That's why I don't usually talk to them, they can only see me when I have my duty. For example, I don't join them during break time. They understand that anyway. Every time I talk to them, I always tell them that I still don't trust people that easily and I have a reputation to protect especially onboard because I want to finish my contract with my dignity intact. I wanted to finish my contract with that intact. Onboard it is easy to create issues because there are people who are not mindful of what they say, they say what they like to say. You as a woman, me as a female onboard, I have to distance myself. (Jen, officer, Asia)

### *Isolation*

Whether it was to protect themselves from gossip or from sexual harassment many women described practicing self-isolation whilst on board. This was very understandable as a practical and pragmatic response to the threats they faced on board. However, such practices are far from healthy as they result in some women spending a great deal of time on their own. Sandra for example explained that:

Actually, here in my current ship, I am now seven months onboard and I am very, very careful here because I am the only female here so most of my time and my rest hour I spend in my room. Sometimes I watch movies with them, but I make sure that if ever I will be with them there will be a space, you cannot enter my space. You stay there I am here. (Sandra, Rating, Asia)

Sometimes disappointed male colleagues levelled criticism at their female counterparts because they kept themselves to themselves and this could have a detrimental effect on relationships and welfare. One seafarer reported that she felt she couldn't win as her colleagues would regard her as 'easy' if she socialised with them and a 'snob' if she did not. She opined:

Yes, sometimes I just stay in my cabin. I know myself, if there are drinks or party, I usually come. But if it's just for fun, I don't think I go. I will enjoy myself and if I go there, I will lose myself. But some men will think that that's the way. You can't understand them. If you don't go, they say you are a snob, if you go they said that you are loose already. I don't care what they think now as long as I am happy, I am working. (Susan, Officer, Asia)

Generally speaking, the tendency to isolate oneself as a coping and protection mechanism was common amongst participants but although it was a conscious choice made by women it was nevertheless one which they wished they did not have to make because of the consequent loneliness and boredom that they suffered. Arni described this when she said:

Yeah, most of the time I just stay in my cabin. [...] Yeah, it's like that. I feel so isolated. I feel so lonely. [...] I just stay most of the time in my cabin, but I tend to socialise whenever there are parties onboard. But other than that, it's work. So, it's just cabin and work, not much going on. (Arni, Officer, Asia).

Overall women seafarers described a variety of ways in which they felt singled out and marginalised on board whilst at the same time feeling overlooked and neglected. In the confined and institutionalised shipboard working environment, they felt that they were constantly living and working under a spotlight where every act was uncomfortably scrutinised. Above all they felt aware of the hostility of some male colleagues with regard to their employment on board and of their vulnerability to physical and sexual harassment. As a result of their feelings of alienation, job insecurity, and fear (of physical attack and of gossip) many chose to isolate themselves in their cabins whilst not on duty. This left them not only isolated from the wider world as all seafarers are to a greater or lesser extent, but also isolated from human contact and interaction on board. In this context it is reasonable to understand women seafarers as likely to benefit disproportionately from port-based welfare services for seafarers. We will turn now, therefore, to the ways in which port-based welfare workers understand the needs of women seafarers and we will then go on to consider the forms of port-based welfare which women seafarers described as supportive and to a consideration of the kinds of support which they would welcome.

### Perceptions of port-based welfare workers

In previous research port-based welfare workers have revealed a great understanding of, and sensitivity to, the life and work of seafarers in general and how this impacts on their welfare needs (Gilliat-Ray et al 2022, Sampson et al 2022, Montemaggi 2018, Palmer and Murray 2016). This understanding has arisen as a result of interactions with seafarers on board their vessels, in minibuses as seafarers are transported to and from ships and in seafarers' centres. It also comes as a result of being in ports and seeing ships both inside and out. This research has indicated, however, that the understanding displayed by port-welfare workers, largely pertains to generic issues relating to seafarers and that the same understanding of the specific life and work of women seafarers has not yet been arrived at. For the most part, women seafarers remain invisible and/or unintentionally overlooked by port-welfare workers who described encountering very few women in the course of their work. One for example told us:

I encounter very few female seafarers. (Chaplain)

Another said that:

Before the Covid, it was very few [women seafarers], and now it's even fewer. I'm saying that in a few months, apart from the regular ships that we've got, it's like you cannot see even five [women seafarers] in a month. (Chaplain)

While a centre manager endorsed this view and confirmed that very few women seafarers called in to the building where he worked. He said:

Probably, overall, there's probably about one percent would be female coming through the door.

Taking this lack of contact into account, it is unsurprising that women seafarers' needs are poorly understood by some port-welfare workers. One chaplain acknowledged that the reason it was difficult to know what provision might suit women seafarers was because they were so rarely encountered. The chaplain explained:

It is very hard to say just because I've seen so little of them especially in the last year or so. I think I've barely seen any. (Chaplain)

In this context, it is easy for port-welfare workers to assume that facilities which have been designed with male seafarers in mind are in fact gender neutral and therefore perfectly adequate for women. One chaplain considered that there were no improvements that could be made to better accommodate women seafarers in the centre, to which he was attached, as everything that seafarers needed was already available. The chaplain elaborated:

Nothing [can be done to improve provision]. It's all because the aim of this place is to provide essential, and the essential is actually very well provided. Wi-fi, changing the money, bar area and sports facility, and a good quality of chaplains providing the spiritual and pastoral support. And, the seafarers are there to work, when they've got time off, the essential is very well provided I think. (Chaplain)

At the same time, the chaplain acknowledged that something as basic as feminine hygiene products was not available in the centre, explaining that:

I don't think we've got specific products for the women at the centre. It is also because the supermarket is only ten minutes away, that's why. (Chaplain)

Thus, it would seem that in this chaplain's mind essential provision covered sports and bar facilities but not the sale or provision of menstrual products. This illustrates the extent to which the desperate needs of some women for easy access to period products is unknown to shore-based port-welfare workers. It is equally likely that they have no inkling of the difficulties faced by women in disposing of sanitary products after use. Certainly, there was no provision for bulk waste disposal in ladies' toilets described by research participants (either seafarers or port-welfare workers).

The provision of bar areas and sports facilities (basketball, billiards, pool etc) may appear to be gender neutral but they may nevertheless be somewhat more valued by males than females. Managers acknowledged that they had never seen women seafarers using the basketball facilities, where they were provided, and one chaplain associated with a small centre pointed out there were limits to what could be provided to seafarers and that in that context much provision was male-centred. The chaplain said:

[We have a ] small facility [and what] we provide is man things, like billiards or football teams, basketball teams. We don't have any ... I don't know what kind of facility that women use. I don't know. (Chaplain)

In the context of very few women seafarer visitors and the historic design of services for a male workforce it is unsurprising that some chaplains were flummoxed when asked how services could be improved for women seafarers. However, in our small sample a couple of chaplains/centre managers could imagine ways of improving provision for women seafarers and in one centre free sanitary towels and tampons were already being provided in the women's toilets. A chaplain connected to a different centre considered that a similar step could be taken there to improve things for women. The chaplain reflected that:

Yes, my only thought is on female products in seafarer centres, I do think there should be a free stock of them in the female toilets. I think that might be, like quite a simple improvement. I know there's maybe questions about if female port employees are using them but still I think that would satisfy a lot of female seafarers. (Chaplain)

They also believed that:

It would be lovely to be able to provide a female only space but at the same time it wouldn't be used very often so it probably wouldn't be a very, you know, the Seafarer's Centre is quite a tight space anyway so I think they would be very reluctant to give a space over to what may be is one seafarer every couple of months instead of having larger communal areas for all of the seafarers. (Chaplain)

This comment highlights what is perhaps the crux of the problem with regard to making better physical port-welfare provision for women seafarers. The additional welfare-related needs of women seafarers arise, in the main, as a result of their minority status on board working cargo ships. Yet this same minority status can lead the providers of port-welfare to consider that in numeric terms women seafarers simply don't warrant special provision. This creates a situation where, just as they are expected to adapt to the male-dominated shipboard environment, so too are women seafarers often expected to find port-welfare provision, which has been designed with a male workforce in mind, adequate for their purposes. In this way, issues such as a desperate need to find a place to responsibly dispose of used sanitary products ashore and to access menstrual care products is overlooked.

The psycho-social needs of women seafarers may also be misunderstood (and therefore not catered for) by port-welfare workers, however. The lack of understanding of the ways in which women seafarers are even more isolated than their male counterparts on board, leads some port-welfare workers to conclude that it would be improper for them to seek them out in any way to see if they require support or assistance. Their assumption is that seafarers should be treated equally and that women seafarers would not welcome being singled out (which is likely to be true in some cases). One chaplain told us:

I mean it's not a question I ever ask. If I see them then yes but a lot of it is down to chance really at that point you know. It depends on who is around, we can't sort of go asking that kind of thing, looking around for them. (Chaplain)

However, this was at odds with the feeling of some women seafarers who considered it both appropriate and necessary for shipboard welfare visitors to quietly and discreetly seek women seafarers out and check that they were OK. One advised ship visitors to:

Not only they talk to the seafarer, the male, always talk to the female, they may say 'I'm ok', ok, but have a good observation, because they say they ok, but mostly we are not, how they talk, how their body language, you can't always say something [as a woman seafarer with difficulties] so [the visitor should] just be observant. (Hilda, officer, Asia)

Hilda's comment presupposes that port-based welfare workers would be sensitive to the body language and behaviour of the women they encountered and could gain a sense of when something was amiss. This is difficult for port-based welfare workers who are not very informed about the kinds of experiences women face on board and therefore cannot imagine the impact of these experiences on the women they encounter. For example, one welfare worker noted that women seafarers were different to their male colleagues seemingly needing more time interacting and chatting and they interpreted this as a difference between men and women more generally rather than appreciating that it could be an indication of the degree to which women were starved of opportunities for social interaction on board. The chaplain noted:

And, you have to be attentively listening [...] perhaps with the woman more, and to have much more time available. [...] Maybe because women like talking, I don't know, but I've experienced that. (Chaplain)

Our data implied that there may also be misconceptions about women seafarers preferring to go to local shops rather than stay at a seafarers' centre. Where women were seen to do this, it was understood by some individuals to be something that women in general like to do. The possibility that the seafarers' centre did not provide for their needs was not therefore properly considered as an alternative explanation.

Overall, as a result of their limited understanding of the issues faced by women seafarers at sea, and the likely psycho-social impact of these issues on women seafarers, women seafarers' needs were largely overlooked by port-based welfare workers. In general, port-based welfare workers tended to assume that seafarers' centres are gender neutral and therefore provide adequately for women visitors. As a result, special provision for women was frequently not made at all or was limited to the provision of free sanitary items (an important resource for women) and/or special women's gifts at Christmas time. Given that chaplains and centre managers themselves have difficulty imagining what better provision for women seafarers might look like, we now turn to what women seafarers considered appropriate as port-based or shore-based welfare support.

## Women seafarers' preferences for port-based, and shore-based, welfare services

### Psycho-social support

In the context of the fears and isolation experienced by women seafarers it is, perhaps, unsurprising that our participants had found great consolation and pleasure in the company of the chaplains and visitors who they had encountered face to face, either on board or in a seafarers' centres ashore. This was particularly the case during the pandemic when chaplains provided women seafarers, and seafarers more generally, with a valuable lifeline. Having met them on board they sometimes remained in touch with them via platforms such as Facebook. One woman described the general benefits of a visit from port chaplains thus:

Chaplains are such a big help to us. Though they always visit us onboard but it was during the pandemic we acknowledged their help. If we want to buy but we cannot go out, so we just list that [what they needed] out. There's a chaplain like Pastor [name and location of chaplain] that I can chat with over the Facebook. So, we can just list what we want and he delivers those onboard, say if that's not what we don't want, he returns it for us. Then when it's ok to go out, it's the chaplain who picks us up and also drives us back there. (Trina, Officer, Asia)

Another extolled the virtues of chaplains and seafarers' centres and described a particular affinity with one female volunteer. She said:

Since I started this career, they're very a big help especially if we are alongside, if we are in other places and they have a seaman's club those people are going on board, priests or chaplain, go on board to talk to us or to give us something, you know to give us a ride to go to the shops or go outside, it's really a big help for us. It's really giving a refreshment to our minds because all the time we're onboard at sea, if they come for us, as I experienced if we know in that place that we have a seaman's club or a person that helps us to go out or something, we always look forward to going to that port because we know that we can go out or we can have something. We can have wi-fi if we want, free wi-fi, we can drink wine outside, so yes, they're playing a big role in this industry, they're giving us how do you call it,



refreshing, refreshment, possibility, love because they love talking, especially here we're almost in Europe and we're going out more. So, we will be in [name of city] and in [name of city] we have one girl there at the seaman's club and she's a really nice girl, she loves to talk, she loves to give a story and she talks a lot, when she's onboard all the people are smiling at her, she's gives good vibes to all the people and she gives us a ride to the store or wherever we go. She really extends herself for us, it's really nice, that's the nicest thing if we have those things, anywhere we go. (Nicola, Rating, Asia)

As with Nicola, some seafarers specifically mentioned gaining considerable support from women chaplains or female staff or volunteers and this was reflected in some comments as to their preferences in relation to port-welfare provision. While some participants felt that they could confide in male chaplains if they felt comfortable with them, others thought they would find it easier to confide in women and they really appreciated it when they came across a woman chaplain or volunteer. When asked if she could confide in a chaplain, a senior officer said, for example, that:

No, I don't know if I can tell him my problems. It is much more easier if I can tell to a woman than to a man even if he is a priest. [...] Yeah, maybe we can do some girl talk. (Susan, Officer, Asia)

Another seafarer responded to a question about whether she had confided in a ship welfare visitor as follows:

No not really because most of the time they are usually [male] priests who go up the ship. But it's a different story I think if another female will go up the ship. [...] [It's more] comfortable if it's a female chaplain. You are more comfortable to share your struggles to another female. (Arni, Officer, Asia)

Her view was echoed succinctly by Mira who said simply:

I think it will be much more ok if it's a female. (Mira, Rating, Asia)

Overall, the impression conveyed by women seafarers participating in the study was that they hugely valued face to face contact with welfare support workers and volunteers in ports. Whilst some women felt comfortable talking to male or female welfare workers this was not overwhelmingly the case. For some women, access to women volunteers/chaplains was particularly important as it was only with women that they felt generally comfortable being themselves and confiding problems.

It was also the case that a considerable number of our participants described finding it easier to talk to someone who had an understanding of life on board than a shore-based individual with no conception of what a ship was. One participant put it this way:

It's much better if it's somebody who has had some experience of, well [...] a seafarer or somebody working within the industry, certainly, that would be able to give more tailored advice. (Polly, officer, Europe)

Another reflected that it could be a mistake to discuss shipboard problems with people who didn't understand the environment as they would be 'pretty much useless'. She explained that she would want someone to advise her who:

[...] knows or understands my line of work, or had the same experience that I had because they will understand me and if they can give me advice on how to deal with this kind of

situation and they will also give me example on how they deal with the situation on their own 'cause you're gonna feel like you are comfortable talking to someone if they have the same experience and they have the same situation beforehand, unlike if you talk to someone who don't have any idea what's happening to your life and then they will give you advice and you are going to feel like, 'oh you're just saying that because you don't understand.' You will feel that at times because they are not on life so it will pretty much... useless to talk to, if you're going to talk to someone who doesn't understand. (Sandra, Rating, Asia)

This need to talk with someone who understood life on board was described by women seafarers as an important reason for needing support, in the first place, from individuals falling outside their family or friendship networks. One seafarer described the situation very well when she told us that:

It is a very specific type of job. While of course I talk about this with my friends a lot they don't really know what it is like to work at sea and what it takes to work at sea perhaps [talking to] somebody with experience of working at sea, even just for a little bit, it would be helpful. [...] I would appreciate somebody to talk with about my professional concerns at sea. [...] I think so, even if it is just to create the sense that you have something in common with the person you are talking with, I think would help to build more trust. [...] I think it is much nicer to talk with somebody with experience at sea. (Maritza, Officer, Europe)

Whilst women seafarers often felt that face to face conversations were ideal when talking about their challenges on board, they also recognised the practical limitations imposed on such encounters as a result of the inherent nature of shipping. In this context, many participants discussed the benefits of online fora. Some suggested chat groups would be helpful to women seafarers. One explained her idea as follows:

Maybe it should have a member's group chat maybe. So that we can talk about your daily life onboard. You can have someone to relate with because this is...for me, for example, I am the only female onboard, I don't have like someone to talk to with the same experience as me. So, I think this... a group chat where every member is [a woman seafarer is] a good idea. And also an app for complaints maybe, or advice. If there is someone that can advise us, if we raise issues then someone can tell us what is the professional way to address the issue, something like this. (Pia, Officer, Asia).

This need to 'discuss' the everyday challenges faced by women seafarers using any means, even chat, was echoed by Sandra who described how talking to people without a vested interest in her job was important. She said:

Every time that I feel...maybe the thing that I need when I have my troubles on board, I need someone to talk to even in chat. I just need someone to listen to me like just listen every time I vent out, they just listen because it's different when you talk to your family. They will understand but there are times when they will not listen to my problems, they will set aside that problem, just say that, 'you can go, you can work harder, just work harder, just work harder and encourage yourself' but if you have someone to talk to and just listen to your rant for what happened to you or your day, that will really help me. (Sandra, Rating, Asia)

Some women went so far as to suggest that an app facilitating contact between women seafarers should be mandatorily provided to them. She suggested that:

All women seafarers should have that app or it should be a...it should be mandatory for female seafarers to have that application. Before embarking the ship, the office or the manning agency will tell them about that application and then we can connect through that application. There is a website that we can connect or chat with other seafarers, something like that. (Lynne, Officer, Asia)

Seafarers mentioned that it would be important for any groups to prioritise confidentiality and some suggested that it would be helpful to involve trained counsellors or psychologists to ensure that any complex and difficult situations could be appropriately addressed by qualified professionals. While access to groups of women seafarers was attractive to many research participants, we also found women seafarers who wanted a more one-to-one chat facility. The ideal scenario for some women was an app or website that facilitated communication with an appropriate individual in an emergency situation, but that also fed into a system whereby at the next port, a welfare visit could be arranged for any distressed seafarers in need of support. One suggested that:

Maybe sometimes [...] you just want to talk to someone right now, then you can just email or message somehow, someone. Or, get guidance if you're having a situation that you don't really know how to deal with the best way, like maybe if you need guidance now, or if you really don't want to talk about it now but you would like to talk about it in person, then you could request them to come to your ship. (Karina, Officer, America)

The desire for the ability to request a visit from a welfare-worker was echoed by other participants in the study. One suggested that:

Maybe they can provide emergency contact e-mail something like that where you can share your issues with your crew mates without divulging your identity. For example, someone will harass me, will really go inside my cabin and I was able to find evidence to that issue. You know, I can send it to them and then they would do something for us, right away. You know it is very, very scary to wait for help if you don't know when help will happen. So, it will be nice if the seafarers' centre will be able to help us. You know communicate with the port that you will be there next. To have something like that. I think it's also good. (Geraldine Rating Asia)

A buddy system was also a popular idea amongst a small number of women seafarers as was a counselling service, for all seafarers, either based in seafarers' centres or available in another 'space'.

## Material provision

In relation to material provision there was a recognition by some women seafarers that seafarers' centres and port chaplains often bring sundry items to the vessel which are aimed at men more than women. As one seafarer explained:

Now, okay, the Seaman's Mission come and they bring something, but it's basically all shampoo and, er, they sell stuff for men and yeah [...] Maybe they don't know there are women on board that they don't think further than that. Or, maybe it's so rare [to have women on board] that, I don't know, I don't think it's so rare these days anymore. I think there are more and more women now. (Raziel, Officer, Europe)

The kinds of products that women had in mind when they talked about material provision for their needs included toiletries, menstrual products and clothing. One woman suggested that:

Maybe they can have like a booth for like they can sell some panties or bra or sports bra, like that. The [sanitary] napkins, they can have like a booth for that. Also, other seafarers will like to buy panties for their wives so maybe they also check what is necessary, not only for us. I think that's it for the female products. For me, I really, really have a hard time looking for facial cleanser, like something for pimples because I have a problem with pimples onboard so I have a hard time buying something like that. Usually when you go to store outside, sometimes you do not understand the label because it is not always in English. So usually seafarers centre has an English speaker so they will be able to, okay this item is like this, like that. So, I have a choice however other stores, other malls, you don't have a choice. You just pick whatever it is even if you don't understand. (Geraldine, Rating, Asia)

Another picked out tampons and being of specific importance. She explained that she would be very pleased to be able to contact port-welfare workers and ask them to bring her some tampons on board. She said:

When you come to a port and the ship doesn't have a lot of time and cargo discharging goes really quick and you can call them, like, can you please bring some-some tampons or whatever, or pick something from the store and it will be fine, then that would be very, that would make life easier. (Raziel, Officer, Europe)

This comment emphasised the reason why it is important to stock sanitary products in seafarers' centres (staffed and unstaffed) as women seafarers may not be permitted shore-leave as such, but may be allowed to dash to a centre to access vital supplies as a favour by a captain etc. This could be because of fast vessel turnaround as in the case of Raziel above, but it could also be because of restrictions imposed as a result of seafarers' nationalities. It is possible they might be allowed to walk within port limits but might not have permission to leave a port.

For many seafarers it was difficult to imagine what provision could be like unless they had already experienced it in some port somewhere in the world. Given the limited nature of provision for women in seafarers' centres they found it difficult to suggest things which they thought did not sound like unreasonable. However, one participant, suggested that beauty salons would be a more female-friendly facility to access in a seafarers' centre. She told us:

I think with regard to recreational facilities, they only just give basketball court. I hope they also give something like beauty salons. (Zoe, Officer, Asia)

This suggestion did resonate with the accounts of several women who discussed the value of being able to wear nail varnish and buy products that allowed them to 'pamper' themselves and experience a little luxury on board, offering them a break from their primarily, masculine-feeling existence.

Another seafarer had experienced the provision of a massage chair for seafarers in a Swedish seaman's club and she remembered it clearly and was very certain about what she would like to see provided to seafarers – male or female. She described how:

When I was in Sweden I saw this seaman's club. It is actually a huge one with a swimming pool, football, and then they have their own sauna and massage chair. I think it will be nice if all the seaman's club have this massage chair, because almost all the crew or all seafarers coming to the seaman's club their main point is to chill or to relax, and this massage chair

when I saw it, it's very nice actually, it's relaxing. [...] Books is always there so it's actually good, what else, guitars. [...] souvenir items that's also good, shirts actually, shirts and some .. what else [...] Ah I think socks, yes, socks is one of the most important things I think when you're working on board, yes socks. (Marni, Rating, Asia)

## Conclusion

The status of women as a minority group, in a highly male dominated crew complement on board cargo vessels, generates a series of challenges and needs which they would not otherwise be likely to experience. They may feel unwanted and 'out of place', they are likely to experience frustrations over training and promotions, they may feel driven to work even harder than anyone else on board causing themselves a great deal of fatigue and stress, they may feel that they are constantly scrutinised and sexualised by male colleagues, they may be harassed and experience considerable fear of both harassment and gossip, and in this broad context they may choose to withdraw from many elements of the shipboard social life and become isolated from crew members on board.

Those women who remain at sea and successfully forge careers on board male dominated cargo vessels, self-evidently have the wherewithal to survive and to professionally thrive despite all of the challenges that they encounter. Quite rightly, they do not regard themselves as 'victims' but they do generally acknowledge that as a result of a challenging shipboard context, which is largely brought about as a consequence of their presence in very small numbers, they do have welfare needs which currently remain unmet.

The detailed experiences of women seafarers are likely to surprise and even shock many port-welfare workers. They are usually sensitive to the overall challenges faced by male and female seafarers alike, but our study suggests that they have a limited appreciation of the ways in which women have to fight for their careers, their rights and their medical needs on board, and how their efforts are so often defeated. As a result, there does not seem to be a great deal of awareness amongst port-based welfare workers of the particular needs of women seafarers and of what may be done ashore to meet these. Where welfare workers are able to imagine what better provision for women seafarers might look like, they readily acknowledge that because women visit seafarers' centres in such small numbers, and because they are a minority group on board, there is a perception amongst funders and fundraisers that it is not worth financially investing in facilities and services for women.

It is a tragic paradox that the minority status of women seafarers creates many of the privations and problems they experience on board, generating a special need for additional welfare support from shore-based services, while their minority status **also** acts as a barrier to the requisite provision for their needs. So long as port-based welfare services fail to meet women seafarers' needs, then it is likely that they will be under-utilised by women despite their additional burdens and need for support. In a context where companies are failing to meet some of the most basic needs of women seafarers, and where shore-based welfare services also fail them, it is reasonable to think that some talented women seafarers may be lost to the industry.

It is our hope that in outlining the experiences of women seafarers and describing how these create specific welfare needs, this report will provide organisations and individuals associated with port-welfare provision with a better understanding of women seafarers and their needs. There are a number of areas where practical support of both a material and a psycho-social nature needs to be

provided to women seafarers and we therefore complete this account with a series of recommendations which arise from our findings. While our research indicates a number of areas where ship and port operators should and could be taking action to assist women seafarers, we restrict our recommendations to those pertaining to port-welfare providers as this was the original brief for our research.

## Recommendations for port-welfare providers

1. As a matter of urgent priority, we recommend that port-welfare centres provide women seafarers with access to facilities for the bulk disposal of used sanitary products.
2. As a matter of high priority, we recommend that menstrual care products are made available to women seafarers either free of charge or on an 'at cost' basis. These should include disposable items such as sanitary towels and tampons but importantly they should also include re-usable items such as menstrual cups and period pants.
3. We recommend that staffed centres remain in place as a matter of priority as these provide women seafarers, in particular, with a much-needed source of human interaction.
4. We recommend that seafarers' centres review the material provision made for women seafarers paying special attention to available clothing size and style, the subject matter of magazines and books, toiletries and skin care products, and gifts and games.
5. We recommend that seafarers' centres do their utmost to attract a staff body (whether paid or unpaid) with a balanced gender profile.
6. We recommend that charitable organisations consider the development of an app to facilitate chat facilities for women seafarers which include access to general chat forums for women seafarers (only) alongside more specialised one-to-one chat services with appropriately qualified and experienced personnel. We further recommend that this app is supported by provision for shipboard follow-up visits to women seafarers who are in need and that account is taken of some women's preference to talk with other women who have an understanding of shipboard life.
7. We recommend that seafarers' centres review the facilities provided to seafarers and consider the degree to which they offer a balance between amenities that are generally more attractive to men and amenities that are more attractive to women.<sup>3</sup>
8. We recommend that information is provided to women seafarers about the support and facilities which are specifically targeted to their needs in port. This information should be taken on board by chaplains and ship visitors (in hard copy format) but should also be described on the websites of seafarers' centres and welfare organisations.

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<sup>3</sup> Extended female bathrooms with comfortable seating, good mirrors and lighting, clean bathtubs, fluffy towels, female toiletries (bubble bath, mild soap, skin toner, and moisturiser) manicure and pedicure kits, hair dryers and curling tongs along with massage chairs could be a practical and achievable way to assist in redressing the imbalance in facilities, for example.

## Limitations

In relation to the original study objectives there were two areas where we were unable to gather data from either women seafarers or shore-based welfare staff. Neither group was able to shed light on new and innovative ways of dealing with welfare needs during the pandemic as, other than chaplains visiting ships with shopping for seafarers (at their request which was sometimes made online), they had not directly experienced such innovations using internet or other facilities. There was also little in the way of direct experience of barriers to current provision that was identified. Whilst women seafarers and chaplains/centre managers talked of theoretical risks which could act as barriers to unstaffed seafarers' centres, neither group gave examples of direct experiences of barriers to use of shore-based facilities. Equally, poor internet coverage was a theoretical barrier to welfare services that make use of the internet, but seafarers did not give any examples of services which they knew of but hadn't been able to access due to lack of internet provision.

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