



15

Key Pain Points

for Women

at Sea



**Diversity@Sea**

**Report no. 1**

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## CREDITS

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# Executive Summary

This report shares the results from a study conducted by the All Aboard Alliance in the Diversity@Sea initiative, where 15 key pain points – or challenges - for women at sea were identified. These key pain points resulted from an analysis of interviews with 115 women seafarers from all ranks and geographies serving onboard vessels from across the global maritime industry.

The 15 key pain points fall into four different categories, the first being the **difficulty of succeeding** professionally at sea for women (i.e., being perceived as less competent than male coworkers, not having equal access to training or tasks onboard, and having to outperform male peers to get respected or promoted). Another category identified involves how **social relations onboard can be especially challenging for women at sea** (i.e., feeling isolated or unsupported because of their gender, the concern of gossip or rumours, or power abuse or sexual harassment and sexual misconduct onboard). The third category of pain points relates to systemic **employment challenges at sea** (i.e., service contracts at sea being too long, lack of family planning options such as maternity leave or sea-shore rotation programmes, resulting in many women having to choose between a career at sea OR starting a family, in turn pushing women seafarers to find employment elsewhere, and finally, many companies still not willing to recruit women seafarers). The final category relates to the **physical conditions onboard** (i.e., lack of access to female sanitary products onboard or lack of access to adequately fitted Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as boiler suits, fire gloves etc., or lack of access to designated women's changing rooms, bathrooms, etc. onboard).

With these 15 key pain points now identified in the first data-gathering step of the **discovery phase**, the All Aboard Alliance is embarking on the next important step of co-designing relevant measures and solutions to address each of the 15 key pain points.

The next step of the project is the **pilot phase**, which will be launched later this year. In this phase, selected vessels from the All Aboard Alliance members with higher-than-average numbers of women officers and crew members onboard will test the co-designed measures and solutions in an action-research approach. The goal is to identify which of the proposed solutions will be most impactful in addressing the 15 key pain points identified by women seafarers, guiding the All Aboard Alliance in making a career at sea more inclusive and attractive to women seafarers in the future.

The Global Maritime Forum and the All Aboard Alliance hope this report will help spread awareness of the major challenges experienced by women at sea and that many will join us on our mission to identify adequate and sustainable solutions for each of the 15 critical pain points. A career at sea must be more inclusive to become attractive to women seafarers and everyone interested in pursuing a career at sea.

# 1.

# Introduction

The All Aboard Alliance for a Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Maritime Industry was established by Global Maritime Forum in May 2022, together with senior leaders from across the maritime industry, and supported by founding knowledge partners, Swiss Re Institute and Diversity Study Group (DSG). The 35 member companies of the All Aboard Alliance remain united by a collective ambition to make the maritime industry sustainable, forward-looking, and inclusive to all talents, and a diverse and equitable industry, which we can all be proud of.

At the first meeting in May 2022, the participating senior executives were aligned on the need for the Alliance to initially focus on two priorities: Diversifying maritime leadership and improving diversity at sea. This resulted in the launch of the first two All Aboard Alliance workstreams being formally established in the autumn of 2022.

This report is the first coming out of the Diversity@Sea workstream, which aims to explore how we can collectively make a career at sea more diverse, inclusive, and attractive to a broader pool of talent. The shipping industry has some of the lowest numbers of women in the workforce, an imbalance especially pronounced at sea, where women make up less than 2% of the global seafaring population. It was therefore decided to initially focus the work of the Diversity@Sea workstream on making life at sea more inclusive and attractive to women.

With the Diversity@Sea workstream, the All Aboard Alliance explores how to make conditions and culture aboard ships more attractive and inclusive to female seafarers. The work of the Diversity@Sea is split into two phases – a discovery phase and a pilot phase:



## The Journey

### **October 2020:**

At the Global Maritime Forum Annual Summit, a working group of industry leaders decided to take collective action on Inclusion & Diversity.

### **October 2021:**

At the Annual Summit in London, the Working Group - supported by the Diversity Study Group (DSG), Swiss Re, and Global Maritime Forum proposed the setup of a global All Aboard Alliance for a more Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive maritime industry.

### **May 2022:**

The All Aboard Alliance was formally launched at an Inaugural High-Level Meeting hosted by Swiss Re in Zurich, with 25 member companies.

### **September 2022:**

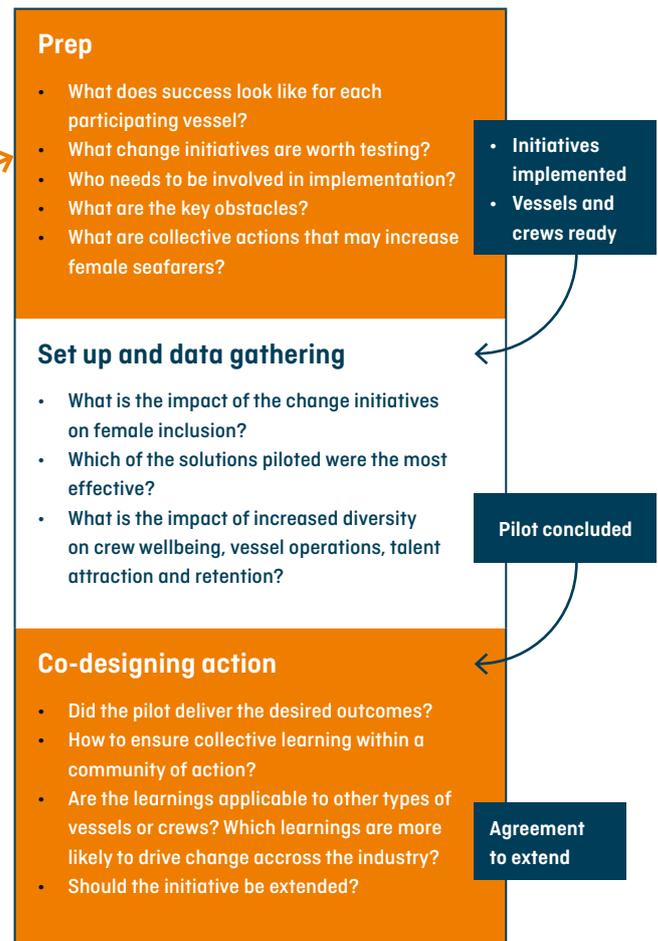
At the Global Maritime Forum Annual Summit in New York, the All Aboard Alliance launched the Diversity@Sea work stream with the purpose of exploring how a career at sea can be made more attractive and inclusive to women seafarers - and everyone else.

## 1. Introduction

### Phase 1 - Discovery



### Phase 2 - Pilot



**Figure 1:** Overview of the two Phases of the Diversity@Sea initiative: The Discovery Phase and the Pilot Phase.

The **discovery phase** began in late 2022 and focuses on understanding existing challenges and critical issues according to the women seafarers themselves. Data gathering led to the identification of the 15 key pain points detailed in this report. Diversity@Sea has now entered the co-design step, where company leaders are working together with subject matter experts and seafarers of different ranks to identify possible solutions, recommendations, and guidelines to address each of the most urgent pain points at sea. Once the discovery phase is complete, the companies involved will collectively decide which guidelines and hypotheses developed in the co-design process they will opt to test in the pilot project later in 2023.

In the **pilot phase**, select vessels with higher-than-average numbers of women officers and crew members, meeting minimum requirements for ensuring safe spaces, will test the co-designed solutions and guidelines. Through action research, they will explore how they each succeed or fail to address the identified pain points. The vessels selected for sailing under the Diversity@Sea banner will be set up to explore what success looks like and what it will take to make life at sea not just more inclusive to women seafarers – and everyone else onboard – but also a desirable career choice to retain existing officers and crew, as well as attracting new talented seafarers to the maritime industry.

## 2.

# Method and approach behind this Diversity@Sea report

The Diversity@Sea workstream sets out to improve gender diversity at sea by collectively exploring how life at sea can be made more inclusive and attractive for women seafarers. We set out to explore the challenges and give voice to women seafarers by interviewing as many women seafarers as possible from different ranks, geographies, and parts of the maritime industry as possible.

An interview guide was developed, and together with the member companies involved, it was possible to conduct a total of 115 interviews with women seafarers across the maritime industry. Interviewees spanned various companies and countries. In addition to collecting the seafarers' age, rank, and nationality, the interviews were built around the following questions:

- **How long have you been working as a seafarer?**
- **Have you worked on vessels with other women seafarers?**
- **What is your preferred ratio/number of women seafarers onboard a vessel?**
- **What have been the obstacles you have experienced in your life at sea? Please specify if the challenges differed for different ranks.**
- **What has made life at sea a positive experience for you?**
- **What else can be done to better prepare vessels and crews for more women seafarers onboard? (e.g., culture, leadership, and contracts etc.)**
- **What could have changed to make you stay at sea? (Relevant only to former seafarers)**

Once the interviews were completed, they were anonymised and submitted to Global Maritime Forum. To explore the different experiences at sea, an analysis was conducted across the 115 interviews to identify patterns and map out what seemed to be the main challenges and critical pain points.

Even if the interviews were only done with women seafarers in the data gathering part, it is vital to stress that the aim of making life onboard more inclusive targets both men and women onboard. Diversity@Sea is therefore making sure to engage and involve both men and women seafarers in the co-design phase, as well as in the pilot. Because to ensure that the solutions are sustainable in a way that will enhance everyone's experience at sea, the learnings and insights gathered during the pilot, as to how well the developed solutions can address each of the 15 pain points, will be collected from all – men and women – crew members onboard.

# 3.

## Findings and results

The majority of the 115 interviewees (59 %) were women at sea with the rank of one stripe (3rd officer, 4th engineer, junior officer, cadet), followed by 22 women in positions with no stripes (rating, Able-Bodied Seafarers etc). 17 of the women interviewed were officers with two stripes (2nd officer, 3rd engineer). Eight of the women interviewed were ranked with three stripes (chief officer, 2nd engineer), and four women with rank of four stripes (captain, chief engineer, doctor). Three women held positions that could not be ranked according to the usual system of stripes (i.e., stewardess).

The interviewed seafarers are of 23 different nationalities. The majority of them, 63 %, come from Asia (mainly the Philippines and India), while a quarter is European, including two from Turkey, 9 % are from Africa, and 3 % are from the Americas.

When asked about their preferred ratio of women colleagues onboard, the women seafarers interviewed had vastly different preferences. Responses ranged from 10% to 75% and from 1 to 10 women, respectively, while one in five women seafarers had no preferred gender ratio. Multiple of the women interviewed emphasised the importance of having women senior officers onboard.

Preferred ratio/number of women seafarers onboard	
50% or more	26 respondents (23%)
Below 50%	14 respondents (12%)
Between 1 and 10 women	56 respondents (49%)
Female officers important	6 respondents (5%)
No preferred ratio or number	22 respondents (19%)



# 4.

## Discussion and analysis

From analysing the women seafarers’ ideas and recommendations for the industry, the Global Maritime Forum identified 15 pain points or challenges, which can be grouped into four categories:

- Difficult for women to succeed professionally at sea
- Challenging social relations onboard
- Employment challenges at sea
- Physical conditions onboard

The first two categories, *difficult for women to succeed professionally* and *challenging social relations*, are challenges related to leadership and culture onboard. *Employment challenges* are more systemic, while *physical conditions* are company-specific.

Difficult for women to succeed professionally	Challenging social relations	Employment challenges	Physical conditions onboard
A culture onboard where women get treated as ‘less’ competent than their male colleagues	A culture in which (avoiding) rumors and gossip is a concern	Contracts at sea are too long	Access to female sanitary products onboard
Women having to outperform male peers to be perceived as competent	Women feeling isolated, unsupported and/or alone onboard	Lack of family planning option, included maternity leave and sea-shore rotation programs	Access to appropriate PPE equipment, e.g. boilersuit size, fire suits and boot sizes
Women having unequal access to on-the-job training onboard	Power abuse by officers	Companies not wanting to recruit women	Access to designated woman changing rooms, bathrooms, laundry area, etc.
Getting assigned different tasks than male colleagues	Sexual abuse and sexual harassment	Women seafarers go elsewhere	

**Fig. 2:** The 15 key pain points identified by women when it comes to working at sea, split into four overall themes

## 4.1 Difficult for women to succeed professionally at sea

One of the most significant challenges to making a career at sea more attractive to women is the women seafarers' perception and experience of it being difficult for them to succeed professionally onboard. Surprisingly, it rarely came across as a complaint but more often as a matter-of-fact statement, a perceived inherent part of the industry. The interviewees were not asking for any special treatment onboard; they just wanted to be treated fairly – and given equitable opportunities to develop their skills and professional career as anyone else onboard.

### A culture onboard where women get treated as 'less competent':

One common experience shared by many of the women seafarers was the experience of being disrespected because of their gender and discriminated against by their male colleagues.

As one chief officer explains: "They think you cannot do the job [...] because you are a woman" (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea). She also shared how she was asked, "Do you know how difficult it is to become a chief officer?" implying that she will not be able to make it (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea). Or, as a younger cadet explains: "It is really disheartening when you put lots of effort in your work and still get comments like 'A male cadet is much better than you'" (Deck Cadet, 2 years). Several women describe discrimination and not being treated as a 'true' professional as one of the biggest problems onboard, as explained by one 2nd officer: "I was not treated as a professional, and there was no trust in my professionalism, as I was often treated as a young girl. It took me much longer to gain respect and trust to secure more responsibilities and be promoted than my male crew members" (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea).

More experienced women at sea were able to offer some of their experience as advice for fellow crew members who experienced disrespect or discrimination on board. One 2nd engineer stated: "When I have been discriminated against because I am a woman, I said: 'Why do you think I cannot do this? Just because my passport says that I am a female?'" (2nd Engineer, 15 years at sea).

Difficult for women to succeed professionally

A culture onboard where women get treated as 'less competent' than their male colleagues

Women having to outperform male peers to be perceived as competent

Women having unequal access to on-the-job training onboard

Getting assigned different tasks than male colleagues

### **Having to outperform male peers to be perceived as competent or be promoted:**

Another experience shared by the women interviewed at sea was that they would often have to do better than their male colleagues to be perceived as competent.

One 3rd officer explains: "I always feel I need to work harder than my male colleagues and constantly prove myself [...] Male colleagues get promoted for average work; I have to stand out to get promoted" (3rd Officer, 5 years at sea). One chief officer reported how she opted to change vessels at one point in her career because she was not treated equally onboard. She was sure this was because of her gender, as she worked equally hard as everyone else and had the necessary experience for a promotion, but others were promoted instead of her (Chief Officer, 14 years at sea).

Interview responses highlighted that women seafarers seem to have to prove themselves repeatedly to be respected professionally just because of their gender – whether as a rating, as a cadet or as a senior officer. One 2nd engineer explains: "Every time I have a new crew, I spend weeks to ensure them that I'm capable of doing my work and have earned my position because of hard work" (2nd Engineer, 10 years at sea).

### **Unequal access to on-the-job training onboard:**

Another pain point reported in the interviews was how women seafarers, especially cadets, experience not being given the same opportunities for training as male cadets by their training officers.

One officer explains: "They have low expectations of you because you are a woman, so they provide you with fewer opportunities and less feedback on how to improve, but they need to teach us the same way as they teach men" (3rd Officer, 8 years at sea).

When exploring possible explanations for the experience of unequal access to on-the-job training, some interviewees suggested that "Training officers being uncomfortable with tutoring women" (2nd Officer, 6 years at sea). In contrast, others reference that some male colleagues onboard do not want to invest the necessary time helping train and develop women seafarers, as they have often seen how women are only [at sea] for a short time before moving on to work in an office (4th Engineer, 7 years at sea).

### **Getting assigned different tasks than male colleagues onboard:**

Another pain point reported by several of the women interviewed was the experience that their male colleagues and superior officers underestimated their ability to do specific tasks onboard. One seafarer explains: "They assume [that certain tasks] are hard when they are manageable for me. One seafarer explains: "The main problem is that sometimes others, especially people from older generations, don't believe that a woman can do tasks that require technical knowledge or physical strength (Ordinary Seawoman, 1 year at sea). Another interviewee shares that "some crew members seem reluctant to give a job order even though I have shown my strength and capabilities" (Ordinary Seawoman, 2 years at sea).

## 4. Discussion and analysis

Or “Sometimes they will not even ask you to do a job because they think that I cannot do it, even if I have already shown them that I can” (Ordinary Seawoman, 2 years at sea). Another challenge reported is the “stereotype that women are more thorough with things like paperwork, so I get assigned a lot more paperwork” (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea).

Overall, these first four pain points describe how women crew members often experience it to be more difficult for them to succeed professionally at sea. Firstly, because of a culture onboard where they experience being treated as ‘less competent’ while having to outperform their peers if they want to be perceived as competent professionals. These challenges are further worsened by an experience of not having the same access as their male colleagues to on-the-job training onboard and not being assigned the same tasks as their male colleagues. If we want a career at sea to be perceived as an attractive opportunity for women, we need to make a successful career at sea equally accessible to women as it is to men.

### 4.2 Challenging social relations onboard

The social relations on board are essential to most of the women seafarers interviewed and represent both the most positive sides of life at sea and the more challenging ones. Forming bonds on board can be difficult across multiple cultural differences, ranks, and also across gender – and with women seafarers accounting for less than 2% of the workforce, most seafarers only rarely sail with women crew members onboard. The challenges range from dealing with complex relations and gossip, which for some result in isolation and loneliness onboard, to experiencing power abuse from officers, notably sexual misconduct ranging from sexual harassment to sexual assaults. These are not challenges experienced only by women seafarers, but they are put forward here as some of the most severe pain points making life at sea particularly challenging for women seafarers.

#### A culture in which (avoiding) rumours and gossip is a challenge and concern:

Many of the women interviewed reported how they felt constantly judged and were consequently highly aware of how they were perceived by others, especially regarding whom they spend time with and where they talk to fellow crew members. This was even more severe if they were the only woman onboard. One officer shares: “Someone might see you in a cabin with a colleague, and then very easily rumours start” (3rd Officer, 5 years at sea). One captain explains how gossiping is especially difficult as a cadet but gets easier to handle with more experience and when reaching higher ranks. She elaborates: “Gossiping is an issue; you need to be highly aware when talking to just one person; you must make sure there are no closed doors” (Captain, 17 years at sea).

#### Challenging social relations

A culture in which (avoiding) rumours and gossip is a concern

Women feeling isolated, unsupported and/or alone onboard

Power abuse by officers

Sexual abuse and sexual harassment

### **Feeling isolated, unsupported, or alone onboard:**

Several women interviewees report how they sometimes feel very alone or isolated, either because socialising is difficult as the only woman onboard or because they choose to withdraw from social relations to avoid gossip. One cadet explains: “There was too much attention on me because I am the only female, I was the centre of attention, and rumours started when I began hanging out with crew members. It was stressful for me, and I ended up isolating myself in my cabin. Gossip is very annoying, and the social side onboard is the most challenging – too much gossip which continued even after I had left the ship. After three months onboard, however, I learned to ignore it [Cadet, 2 years at sea].

This problem applies to younger crew members, cadets, and more experienced officers: “I feel lonely and isolated when I’m the only woman onboard” (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea) because social relations can be difficult. Another officer explains: “Socialising onboard, forming bonds and relations is difficult, maybe because people are more careful coming closer to females onboard” (3rd Officer, 5 years at sea). But being more women onboard, especially in senior ranks, can provide significant support against the isolation reported by many: “Now I am in a senior position, and recently I had two female cadets with me onboard. They were intimidated by me as I was their training officer. But we watched movies together every Sunday and socialised to help them feel more comfortable onboard” (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea).

### **Power abuse by officers:**

In the interviews, there were multiple reports of power onboard being used to intimidate people in lower ranks. As one senior officer explains: “I know many situations where those in higher positions (mostly men) take advantage of those in lower ranks. On multiple occasions, I experienced how higher-ranking officers made me feel little” (Medical Operations Manager, 7 years at sea). Several cadets report how senior officers onboard would speak demeaningly about women onboard. One deck cadet describes her supervisors onboard as “really rude” (Deck Cadet, 3 years at sea). A chief officer shared, “when I was a cadet, my Chief Mate told me that even if I did everything right, I would never be a seawoman. He treated me like I was lower than the bottom [...] They always wanted to prove that they owned me. This was the brutal truth when I started my career” (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea).

Another officer explains how she has experienced all sorts of power abuse onboard, ranging from sexist remarks to bullying, discrimination, and neither being seen nor heard onboard – and being blamed for anything bad that happens since “women are bad luck onboard” (3rd Officer, 6 years at sea). Another officer stressed an urgent need to “change the culture that allows higher ranking officers to wield power and influence without repercussions” (Fleet Doctor, 16 years at sea).

### Sexual abuse and sexual harassment:

A recent survey by WISTA<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that 66% of the surveyed women seafarers reported experiencing harassment, despite policies being in place in 97% of the companies the interviewees were working at. Even if we did not ask any specific questions about sexual assaults and harassment in the interviews, the challenges related to sexual abuse, harassment, and even assaults were frequently brought up in the interviews.

Unfortunately, we still know very little about how often sexual misconduct occurs. They are seemingly only rarely reported: “Women onboard must feel safe and understand that reporting the issues to Captain or company will not lead to losing their jobs. 90% of abuse and harassment cases are not reported for fear of losing their job” (2nd Engineer, 10+ years at sea).

Multiple of the interviewees mentioned experiencing sexual harassment or bullying; here are just a few statements: “I was sexually harassed onboard when I was a 3rd engineer” (2nd Engineer, 16 years at sea), or “I was sexually harassed, and one captain wanted to degrade me because I did not want to sleep with him” (Chief Officer, 15 years at sea); or “I have experienced working with people who don’t know how to respect women – in how they behave and what they say – who have attempted to touch my private parts, asking sexist questions or making sexist jokes” (Mess woman, 2 years at sea).

Other women reported witnessing sexual abuse onboard: “On one ship, an officer used his position to coerce female subordinates into doing sexual favours for him, and when one of them raised concerns with senior officers, it was dismissed with comments such as ‘We all know what he’s like’” (Fleet doctor, 15 years at sea). Other women describe how they find ways to protect themselves: “Already as a cadet, I learned to keep my distance. You can be friendly, but it is essential to maintain personal space as a boundary. I tell people; you can talk to me, but you can’t touch me (2nd Engineer, 16 years at sea).

Some interviewees made calls for specific companies to take action to prevent sexual misconduct onboard but also make sure to have the means necessary to respond and investigate when sexual assaults happen. One particularly chilling request for action came from one of the women at sea: “If possible, CCTV in public areas. It will lessen the thought of maybe we will be raped and just thrown at sea without any evidence” (Mess woman, 2 years at sea).

As presented above, women struggle not only with work-related challenges at sea but also with the social aspects of life onboard. Even though various measures are already in place within most companies to address sexual harassment, multiple women still report sexual misconduct as a major pain point at sea.

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1 WISTA: *Gender Diversity Second Edition: Heading Towards an Inclusive Work Culture*, 2016. The booklet is available [here](#).

## 4.3 Employment challenges at sea

Some of the challenges raised by the women seafarers were more systemic and general, notably those related to general employment practices at sea, ranging from the assignment and contract lengths at sea to lack of family planning options, with women seafarers often having to choose between starting a family or continuing their career at sea. This dilemma seems to be one of the primary reasons for women leaving their jobs at sea entirely. A separate challenge reported by several women was their experience of many companies flatly refusing to recruit women.

### Contracts at sea are too long:

Over the last three decades, offering temporary, short-term contracts at sea has become the norm instead of permanent long-term employment. Most seafarers today can therefore be referred to as 'contract workers – often contracted on four, six, eight or even nine-month assignments. In a time when the ability to plan career – and family life – is increasingly becoming a priority, this contract structure can be challenging if wanting to attract women seafarers and younger generations at sea. "We need to have a better balance between job and personal life – which requires shorter contracts" (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea), as also elaborated by another officer: "It is important that we find a way to have shorter contracts because it impacts morale, endurance, and tolerance onboard" (2nd Officer, 6 years at sea).

The primary pain point associated with the length of contracts and assignments is that it has women choosing between their careers at sea and starting a family. One 2nd engineer explains: "The main reason women don't go to sea or choose to quit is the duration of contracts. Women want to succeed in both their careers and family. But when it comes to family, they must choose. [...] If contracts were shorter, more women would consider continuing to work at sea" (2nd Engineer, 10 years at sea). Unsurprisingly, a growing ask among seafarers seeking employment is for the shorter contract length.<sup>2</sup> One woman seafarer explains: "All we ask for is an opportunity to grow in our career" (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea).

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2 A. Acharya: *Attraction and retention of seafarers: a case study using choice-based conjoint analysis*, 2022. World Maritime University. The study is available [here](#).



### Lack of family planning options, including maternity leave and sea-shore rotation programs:

According to a recent Women in the Workplace Analysis from McKinsey,<sup>3</sup> the pandemic has brought about record-high stress levels and mental health challenges among working mothers. The women seafarers interviewed are asking for company support, allowing them to simultaneously have a family and career at sea without paying a high price of stress and mental health challenges.

One 2nd engineer explains: "I would like to have a happy family and become successful in my career. If my employers will accept it and be able to help me in that matter – I will continue to sail for many years" (2nd Engineer, 10+ years at sea). A specific call was made for better access to sea-shore rotation programs when the family needs you closer: "It would be nice if it were possible to take a break when starting a family and then come back" (3rd Officer, 7 years at sea). "With more support from companies with flexible career opportunities at sea, more women will choose a career at sea and be more likely to continue as seafarers" (Medical Manager, 7 years at sea). Many women have had to make a choice between family and career at sea – and are constantly seeing other women at sea having to make similar choices: "Many of my fellow female classmates now work onshore because they wanted to be able to start a family" (Captain, 17 years at sea).

### Companies not wanting to recruit women:

Another challenge reported by many of the women seafarers interviewed was getting hired, especially at early stages in their careers. This challenge differs significantly across geographies and cultures. One woman seafarer explains: "Only two crewing companies agreed to take me as an engine cadet, 98% of companies where I started my career even refused to talk" (2nd Engineer, 10 years at sea). Some report companies and crewing companies favouring men: "[It's] not easy to get hired in the first place as a woman seafarer, as a lot of them prefer men only" (2nd Officer), while some companies and academies flatly refuse: "I had been rejected during application to Maritime Academy because I was the first woman to apply for marine engineering in the history of our country" (2nd Engineer, over 10 years at sea). Other companies try to provide specific vessels for women seafarers, with other vessels being men only: "The company I sailed for had only one vessel they allowed women to sail on – other vessels were reserved for male seafarers" (3rd Engineer, 4 years at sea). When applying for her first cadet job, one seafarer heard comments that many companies didn't want to hire women because 'women onboard are trouble' (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea).

Women seafarers go elsewhere: One of the more severe consequences of the many pain points raised in this report is that several of the women interviewed describe how they experience being almost pushed out of the maritime industry, either towards the cruise industry or away from a career at sea entirely. Even if there are often higher numbers of women in the academies, they tend to opt for other sectors. One cadet describes: "Most female students end up joining the cruise industry - with better shore leave access and more women" (Deck Cadet, 1.5 years at sea). Other seafarers explain how the difficulty of starting a family, combined with the existing culture onboard, may also be important drivers in women seafarers leaving the maritime industry behind.

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<sup>3</sup> McKinsey & Company: *Women in the Workplace*, 2022. The report is available [here](#).

## 4. Discussion and analysis

As concluded by one of the younger seafarers interviewed: “Many end up leaving the industry because of harassment, disrespect, and discrimination” (Ordinary Seaman, 2 years).

When looking into the more systemic employment challenges at sea, the current length of contracts emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned pain points. The call for shorter sea service contracts was especially evident from Asian crew members, who are often employed for longer sea lengths. Other systemic employment challenges which will be crucial to address in the pilot are related to the need for easier transition between sea and shore positions and especially finding ways to prevent anyone at sea from having to choose between having a career at sea or starting a family.

### 4.4 Physical conditions onboard

Many women seafarers raised issues related to physical challenges on board, including the need for more access to female sanitary products, work equipment that fits women, and designated private spaces. While some challenges can be hard to pinpoint and address due to their intangibility, physical challenges and inevitable consequences, such as unsafe work environments, are evident.

#### Access to female sanitary products onboard:

Many of the women interviewed reported having to bring their own sanitary products onboard for their monthly period, while some women shared that they were not even aware of this being necessary before onboarding: “For the first trip, I had to pack six months’ supply, and if I had not been told about this from my female mentor, I would not have known to bring this myself” (Deck Cadet, on her first vessel). This can be a considerable challenge, especially on the first contract.

This was especially a pressing issue during the covid pandemic. As explained by one 3rd officer: “During covid, when there was limited access to shore leave, women seafarers did not have access to sanitary products during their period because there were no sanitary products in the hospital” (3rd Officer, 2 years at sea). Not surprisingly, calls were made for companies to provide women seafarers with the appropriate products onboard: “Companies should include women hygiene products in the hospital onboard, so we do not have to bring everything onboard ourselves” (2nd Engineer, 16 years at sea).

#### Access to appropriate personal protective equipment, e.g., boilersuit size, fire suits, and boot sizes:

Similar to sanitary products, there has been a notable lack of access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in women’s sizes onboard. Seafarers of various ranks and

#### Physical conditions onboard

Access to female sanitary products onboard

Access to appropriate PPE equipment, e.g. boilersuit size, fire suits and boot sizes

Access to designated woman changing rooms, bathrooms, laundry area, etc.

## 4. Discussion and analysis

expertise speak of having to carry their own boots onboard due to a lack of appropriate sizes provided on the vessels [Deck Cadet, 1 year at sea] (Former Officer, 11 years at sea) [Engine Cadet, 2.5 months at sea].

One 2nd engineer stated that “overalls never fit; they need to be designed for different kinds of bodies and be more comfortable for women onboard” (2nd Engineer, 16 years at sea). According to the interviewees, even working gear onboard ships was initially unavailable for women (2nd Officer, 9 years at sea). While progress was made on the availability of smaller PPE sizes, it has returned to the initial stage over time (Former Officer, 10 years at sea).

### Access to designated woman changing rooms, bathrooms, laundry area, etc.:

Additional problems arise for women onboard when there is a lack of access to facilities allowing them to change, do chores, and use the bathroom.

A 3rd engineer explained that only new ships had designated toilets for women in the accommodation space, while the older ships did not. She was personally faced with the issue of no women’s bathroom in the engine room (3rd Engineer, 6 years at sea). For a former officer, another issue was the cleanliness and hygiene of public toilets onboard (Former Officer, 11 years at sea).

A cadet shared that she needs to go to her cabin to change when no changing rooms are available (Cadet, 3 years at sea). Even when there are female changing rooms onboard, they tend to get used for other purposes, as was criticised by a former officer: “Female changing rooms should be designated changing rooms for females and not used for other purposes to ensure the comfort of privacy” (Former Officer, 11 years at sea).

As seafarers face one of the highest risks of workplace injury, PPE is considered a crucial first line of defence to ensure safety onboard. If a woman cannot find correctly fitting and comfortable PPE onboard, she will likely be at increased risk of injury.<sup>4</sup> Most companies are already addressing this pain point, especially because the recent amendments to the MLC, 2006 require that by December 2024, all seafarers have access to appropriately sized PPE. Nevertheless, having access to appropriate sanitary and the ability to shower or change clothes in private are other pain points in need of attention.

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4 Safety4Sea: PPE: A critical factor to seafarer’s safety onboard, 2019. The article is available [here](#).

# 5.

## Conclusions and next steps

The 15 identified key pain points experienced by women at sea and presented in this report may be concerning, but they provide an important first step towards us as an industry, being able to work together to address each of these challenges. We can now focus our work together on making a career at sea more inclusive and attractive to women seafarers – and equally so for their male colleagues at sea.

In March 2023, the All Aboard Alliance began exploring possible solutions and guidelines to address the 15 identified pain points within the Diversity@Sea initiative. In two co-design workshops hosted by the Global Maritime Forum, participants were divided into working groups, each composed of seafarers of different ranks, senior company representatives, and subject matter experts from various fields. The workshops aimed to start collectively identifying and co-designing possible measures and solutions for the key pain points listed in this report.

The first co-design workshop focused on the issues of power abuse, sexual assaults and harassment at sea, and equal access to professional success onboard, while the second co-design workshop focused on making contracts and service lengths at sea more inclusive and making employment practices at sea more family-friendly. In the different groups, more than 60 participants collaborated on co-designing new measures and solutions, which resulted in a series of promising new ideas and concepts, which are currently being turned into a set of guidelines to be tested in the pilot phase later this year.

The following steps will be for these co-designed measures and solutions to be discussed by the Diversity@Sea Steering Committee, consisting of C-level executives from the initiative's member companies. The Steering Committee will then decide the minimum requirements for vessels to be able to take part in the pilot (e.g., gender ratio, physical conditions, cultural conditions) and agree on the final set of measures and solutions to be tested, aiming to address the 15 identified pain points. The ambition for the pilot is to understand what 'attractive' and 'inclusive' looks like for the industry – in practice.

The ships and crews selected for the pilot will be set up to test the proposed measures and provide real-time feedback and learnings on the feasibility and direct impact of the proposed measures to understand what works well and what does not in making a career at sea attractive to women seafarers – and all their peers at sea.

The Global Maritime Forum and the All Aboard Alliance hope this report will help spread awareness of the major challenges experienced by women at sea and that many will join us on our mission to identify adequate and sustainable solutions for each of the 15 critical pain points identified in this report, in order to make a career at sea attractive to women seafarers and everyone else interested in pursuing a career at sea.



## About the All Aboard Alliance

The Alliance aims to significantly improve diversity, equity, and inclusion across the maritime industry. Not just because the maritime industry's most important stakeholders expect companies to do so but because the industry needs a wide variety of skills and competencies to innovate through the triple disruption caused by decarbonisation, digitalisation, and automation.

The Alliance sets out to provide a robust platform for collaborative and ambitious action across the industry through high-level engagement of senior executives in a **high-level community of action**, which allows industry leaders to work together to make their companies – and the overall industry – more diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

The All Aboard Alliance is designed around five diversity, equity, and inclusion **Alliance principles**, which member companies are encouraged to implement into internal policies, procedures, and leadership practices – and all member companies are assessed annually against these five principles. More information about the All Aboard Alliance and its principles is available [here](#).



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## About Global Maritime Forum

The Global Maritime Forum is an international not-for-profit organisation committed to shaping the future of global seaborne trade to increase sustainable long-term economic development and human wellbeing.

In 2022, Global Maritime Forum established a **strategic programme focused on human sustainability**. This topic is relatively new in the maritime industry but focuses on ensuring dignity and respect for every human being across the supply chain – both at sea and onshore – and, thus, the human side of the maritime industry and trade. The Global Maritime Forum focuses on four primary issues as the core of the strategic human sustainability programme: 1) Diversity, equity, and inclusion; 2) Human well-being; 3) Human safety; and 4) Securing future skills and competencies.

The All Aboard Alliance and Diversity@Sea are important initiatives in the human sustainability programme at Global Maritime Forum.

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