

# Women in Maritime – Breaking Barriers

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## Abstract

The maritime industry has long been dominated by men, but history shows that women have consistently fought to break barriers in this field. From early pioneers to modern trailblazers, women have demonstrated exceptional leadership, skill, and resilience at sea. Despite facing challenges such as workplace discrimination, gender biases, and limited career advancement opportunities, women continue to make strides in maritime. With the support of organizations, companies, and government policies, the industry is evolving to become more inclusive. This paper explores the contributions of pioneering women, the challenges they have faced, the efforts to promote gender equality, and the future of women in maritime with advancements in automation and policy changes.

Keywords: Women in maritime, IMO gender policies, gender equality, seafaring, automation, leadership.

## Introduction

Women in maritime have had to overcome deep-seated biases and institutional barriers. Historically, the industry has been male-dominated, but some exceptional women have challenged societal norms and paved the way for future generations. This paper provides an overview of their contributions, ongoing challenges, and the initiatives shaping the future of women in maritime.

## Objective:

The objective of this research is to understand the journey of women in the maritime sector, identify key challenges, and assess the effectiveness of existing measures to support female seafarers. It aims to highlight the progress made and the gaps that remain, offering insights into how the industry can foster a more inclusive environment. By analysing both

historical and current trends, the study seeks to propose strategies for increasing female participation and leadership in maritime, ensuring a more diverse and equitable future.

## Scope of Study:

The scope of this study encompasses an analysis of the historical contributions of women in maritime, the challenges they face, and the evolving industry landscape. It explores the barriers women encounter at sea, including discrimination, career progression limitations, and safety concerns. The study also examines the role of policy changes, technological advancements, and industry initiatives in promoting gender equality and improving working conditions for women. Furthermore, it evaluates the future of women in maritime, considering the impact of automation and other technological shifts.

## 1. Historical Evolution of Women in Maritime & Pioneers

### 1.1. 19th Century: Industrial Revolution & Steamships

Throughout the 19th century, the maritime industry was overwhelmingly male-dominated, with approximately 97–98% of the workforce being men. Women represented only 2–3% of the workforce, primarily serving in supportive roles such as stewardesses, lighthouse keepers, and nurses. The rise of steamships during this period revolutionized global trade but did little to improve gender balance in maritime employment.

A significant milestone came in the 1930s when Anna Ivanovna Shchetinina emerged as the world's first female ship captain, commanding a vessel at just 27 years old in 1935. This marked a pivotal moment for women in maritime leadership, laying the groundwork for future progress.

1.2. 20th Century: World Wars & Early Modern Shipping

The onset of World War I and World War II accelerated the entry of women into maritime roles. The demand for naval support, engineering, and communications during global conflicts led to an increase in female participation, rising to around 3–5% by the mid-20th century. However, most women remained confined to non-deck roles aboard merchant and passenger ships. Despite incremental progress, gender barriers persisted in the maritime industry. Nevertheless, pioneers like Grace Hopper, a U.S. Navy officer and computer scientist instrumental in naval computing advancements, helped pave the way for greater female involvement in technical and operational roles.

1.3 21st Century: Modern Shipping Industry

Today, women account for approximately 2% of seafaring roles and 20–25% of overall maritime industry jobs. Organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA) have played key roles in promoting gender inclusion and increasing opportunities for women in leadership positions.

1.4 Early Female Mariners

Captain Anna Ivanovna Shchetinina – The first female ship captain, commanding a vessel at just 27 years old in 1935.

Radhika Menon – India's first female captain of a merchant navy vessel, inspiring many Indian women.

Grace Hopper – A U.S. Navy officer and computer scientist, instrumental in naval computing advancements.

These women faced extreme challenges, including gender discrimination and skepticism from their male counterparts. However, their perseverance paved the way for future generations.

Century	Male Employees (%)	Female Employees (%)	Notable Developments
19th	97-98	2-3	First Female Captain
20th	95-97	3-5	WW1 and WW2 increased female participation
21st	75-80 (overall), 98 (seafarers)	20-25(overall), 2 (seafarers)	Gender Inclusion Policies introduced

2. Modern Trailblazers

In the 21st century, gender disparity remains evident, with women constituting just 2% of the seafaring workforce and 20-25% of the broader maritime sector. However, organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Women's

International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA) are actively advocating for gender inclusivity. Women now occupy key positions as captains, engineers, and deck officers, yet their representation remains disproportionately low compared to their male counterparts.

While historical figures opened doors, modern women continue to reshape the maritime industry. Some of today's trailblazers include:

2.1 Breaking Records and Redefining Roles

Captain Radhika Menon – The first woman to receive the IMO Award for Exceptional Bravery at Sea after a daring rescue operation.

Cole Brauer – The youngest American woman to race solo around the world, breaking records.

Captain Hettie Geenen – A leader in the offshore sector advocating for more women in leadership positions.

These women serve as role models, proving that gender does not define one's ability to excel in maritime careers.

3. Challenges Faced by Women at Sea

Despite progress, women in maritime still face significant challenges, including:

3.1. Workplace Discrimination & Gender Bias

Women often struggle to gain the same level of respect and opportunities as their male colleagues.

Gender stereotypes lead to doubts about their capabilities in physically demanding roles.

3.2 Safety Concerns

Reports of harassment and lack of safety measures onboard remain a major issue.

Limited access to proper accommodation and hygiene facilities makes life at sea difficult for women.

3.3 Career Progression Barriers

Women face difficulties in reaching leadership roles due to biases in promotions.

There is a lack of mentorship and networking opportunities for women in maritime.

Real-life cases and industry reports highlight the need for stronger policies and enforcement to address these challenges.

4. Initiatives & Progress

Several organizations and governments are actively working to promote gender diversity in maritime. Key initiatives include:

4.1 Industry Efforts

Diversity@Sea Campaign – Advocating for equal opportunities for women in shipping companies.

IMO's Gender Equality Initiatives – Training programs and scholarships promoting female participation.

Company Recruitment Programs – Shipping firms setting diversity targets and encouraging the hiring of women.

#### 4.2 Leadership Development

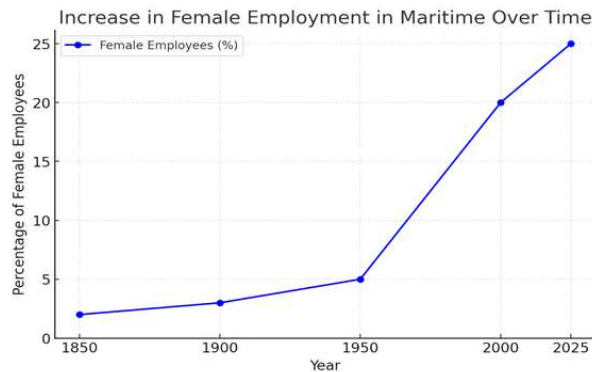
Policies are shifting to ensure more women take up senior positions in maritime companies and regulatory bodies.

These initiatives indicate that the industry is gradually embracing change, but more effort is needed to achieve full gender equality.

#### 4.3 Step Towards Improvement

The IMO advocates for stricter enforcement of gender policies, more government support, and continued industry collaboration to break existing barriers. Encouraging more inclusive hiring policies and addressing workplace safety concerns remain top priorities.

### Graph 1: Female Employment Trends in Seafaring [1900-2025]



(Placeholder for Graph: The graph illustrates the gradual increase in female seafarers from 1900 to the present, with projected growth trends based on IMO initiatives.)

### 5 Future of Women in Maritime

The future of women in maritime looks promising, with technological advancements and policy reforms creating a more inclusive environment.

#### 5.1 The Role of Automation

Automation and AI-driven ship operations are reducing the need for physical labor, making the industry more accessible to women.

Remote monitoring and control technologies allow for better work-life balance, encouraging more women to join the field.

#### 5.2 Increasing Female Participation

With improved working conditions and growing awareness, female participation in maritime is expected to rise.

Educational institutions are introducing specialized programs to encourage young women to pursue maritime careers.

#### 5.3 What Still Needs to Improve?

Stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination policies.

More mentorship and support networks for women in maritime.

Increased efforts to change societal perceptions about women in the industry.

By addressing these areas, the maritime industry can move toward true gender equality, ensuring that women are not just present but thriving in leadership roles.

### 6. Conclusion

The maritime industry has come a long way in breaking gender barriers, thanks to pioneering women, modern trailblazers, and progressive initiatives. However, significant challenges remain, particularly in workplace discrimination, safety, and career advancement. As automation and policy reforms reshape the industry, the future looks promising for women in maritime. Continued efforts are needed to create a truly inclusive and diverse workforce where women can thrive as equal partners at sea.

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**Links:**

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