

Collective Consciousness and Female Seafarers' Stress Who have passed through the Port City of Durban

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Abstract

Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Borderless waters and emptiness of sea gift women seafarers the hollowness. The economically driven women take up this gender biased job amidst all these psychological traumas in the maritime industry. The proneness towards loneliness due to male dominated work force push them to get into new short time relationship leaving behind the family on shore. Interviews with the female seafarers from Italy, Philippines, China, India, Africa and Korea who have passed through the Port City of Durban are the standing examples for this mental trauma. The collective consciousness of their homes and contemporary male dominated demanded situations jeopardized them in socio economic and psychotical dilemmas. This paper examines psychological issues that women seafarers experience due to economic reasons.

Key words: Depression, Gender bias, Maritime industry

Introduction

Women engage in work on board ships, accompanied by long absences from their families in order to support them financially. According to Klein (2004) they are forced to leave their children in the care of surrogate caregivers; mothers, grandmothers or close relatives. They often find themselves in entry-level positions on board ships. These poor employment opportunities, a result of poor skills, alongside low levels of education propel them into gendered, domestic work on board ships. Women who work as seafarers can be found in occupations at all levels on board ships, but the majority of women who work on board are found

in the dining room, they are found in cleaning rooms, in the galley and below deck (Chin, 2008, p. 21). Seafarers on cruise and passenger ships are often paid substandard wages and live under a system which does not guarantee work (2008, p. 113). These seafarers arrive on ships for work, mostly from India, Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, Central America and the Caribbean (Chin, 2008). The ITF reports that below decks on virtually all cargo vessels, passenger and cruise ships, there is a hidden world of long hours, low pay, insecurity and exploitation (Prabhudas, 2004).

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Research Methodology

The findings that are presented in this paper are drawn from qualitative interviews conducted over a six-month period from September 2012 – January 2013 with female seafarers ranging from the age of twenty to the age of forty five years old at the Port City of Durban. Women in this study represent a wide range of nationalities, race, religions and cultures. They are all mothers. The Southern African International Sailors Society (SAISS) were instrumental in helping to gain access to the research participants. With the arrival and departure of cruise liners at the Port City of Durban, many hours were spent investigating the places which female seafarers frequented, when and if they were allowed to leave the ship while in the port. Email contact was made with female seafarers in other countries and their experiences were documented with permission. A Facebook page was set up in November 2012 and we have established on going communication with seafarers from across the globe. From the contacts made through the Facebook forum, several women indicated that they were interested in participating in the research. This was a twofold process, firstly through the use of a semi-structured ‘social networking chat site’ in addition to an online survey posted onto Facebook’s ‘seafarers’ forum. The original responses from all the participants are used in the paper. Although all respondents were conversant in English, this was not always their mother tongue.

The interviews lasted up to three hours. Follow up interviews were made very difficult to establish, due to the participants short visits to the port and therefore not possible for this paper. However, more participants’ will be gathered using the snowball technique as reaching out to women seafarers is comparatively difficult. According to Babbie (1995, 287), “snowball sampling is a technique that begins with a few relevant subjects that you’ve identified and expands the sample through referrals”. Davies (2007, 56) further explains that the researcher has no control over who falls into the sample (size, race and gender) and consequently the researcher has no means of knowing to what extent the information you get or the opinions that are expressed do or do not reflect the total ‘population’- or even what that ‘population’ might consist of.

Point of Contact, Gaining Entry

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

The Durban Port was officially recognised with the appointment of the first Port Master in the 1940s

(Ports&Ships, 2012). Since then the port has shown substantial growth, a new port that has only been recently approved, will extend services and be found, south of the current port (Ports&Ships, 2012). The current facilities off the port offer three hundred and two railway lines to transport goods to-and-through from the harbour, ship repair facilities, a dry dock, a privately owned floating dock, docking facility, docking facilities for sea cruise ships and container facilities (Ports & Ships, 2012). The port also offers a single buoy mooring which caters for Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCC) that are too large to enter the port (Ports & Ships, 2012). All of these facilities need personnel to ensure that the port facilities run effectively. Thus, the port is the largest employer in KwaZulu-Natal (Ports & Ships, 2012). Few ships are registered in South Africa, most are registered in foreign countries (Hutson, 2012). According to Ruggunan (2008, p. 288) there are very few South African registered ships. The vessel is said to be flying a Flag Of Convenience (FOC) (Sharda, 2012). The shortage of South African registered ships has led to the lack of interest in promoting seafaring as a career choice for young South Africans in addition to the lack of ships for seafarers to train on (Ruggunan, 2008, p. 288).

Meet the Agent

It is not uncommon for both men and women who secure employment on board cargo vessels, passenger ships and cruise ships to access employment through the

use of recruitment agents. If they live in a coastal city, they are often tempted by the beauty and the glamour of the cruise liners; they are also lured into employment because of payment in US or European currencies. These currencies are valuable when converted into the local currencies of India, Asia, Eastern Europe, Central America and Africa. The employment agent plays an important role in the life of the seafarer, that person is often the one that “forwards money to the workers family.” The use of an agent is a costly exercise, and workers are often in debt before they have even started working. Paying off the debt can take a long time. A cook employed on the ship gave a Bombay agency \$2000 US dollars which included airfare. That sum was almost a third of the \$7000 he would make during his 10-month contract (R. A. Klein, 2002).

Vulnerable women and men from all over the world owe money before they have started to earn. The promise of earning in US dollars on board in the world’s finest cruise liners propels them to pay shipping agents a fee to secure employment. It is reported that an agency in Romania “charges \$500 for an interview and an additional \$1000 to confirm employment” (R. A. Klein, 2002). Lloyds List reported that “prospective shipboard employees were charged \$57 to receive and transmit their resume to potential employees”(R. A. Klein, 2002). International Labour Regulations require that the above mentioned fees are meant to be covered by the cruise liners. This is often overlooked and the seafarers cover

these costs in order to secure employment (R. A. Klein, 2002).

This makes women seafarers not to give up jobs though they face gender bias or suffer from home sickness. It is not only the economic burden they have on their shoulders, but also the burden of their debts owed to the seafaring agents that add more to their psychological strains.

Women Board the Ships

The 25000 women currently employed as seafarers (Thomas, 2004, p. 309) are recruited from developed or developing countries and their participation varies according to the region (Ruggunan, 2008). Female seafarers may find that they do not have equal access to facilities and equipment available to male workers (Finke, 2012; ITF Seafarers, 2012f). This limited access can compromise their privacy, health, opportunities for advancement, abilities to communicate with family and socializing opportunities.

Natalia Prosdocimi made a conscious choice as a young girl to select a profession as a seafarer (ITF, 2005c). She is from Argentina and was faced with the challenges of entering a male dominated sector and as the barriers of gender began to be dismantled globally her chance improved for a life at sea (ITF, 2005c). 'To a large extent, we have to thank trade unions for this law, which gave women the right to graduate as deck or engine officers', says Natalia. Natalia was the only woman in her class when she joined the naval school, a pioneer in her field

(ITF, 2005c). She graduated after ten years of studying in 2004, and became the first woman captain to be appointed in Argentina (ITF, 2005c). But success did not come easy to Natalia, as she argued that her superiors expected her to work harder than the male seafarers (ITF, 2005c).

When I began to work, I also experienced discrimination from some higher officials. Women need to make a double effort in order to be accepted. They are always being tested, and they work under greater pressure. These realities stop them from taking on this career and may discourage them from staying in it. (ITF, 2005c)

The same treatment was repeated in the case of Vanesa. When Vanesa Soto stepped on board *Global Mariner* it was her first time on board a ship (ITF, 2005c). In July 1998, the *Global Mariner* sailed away from London, travelling through 86 ports in 51 countries on a trip around the world that lasted 20 months. In total, 750,000 visitors attended the exhibitions about life at sea. Vanesa was one of them (ITF, 2005c). This journey was a catalyst in her becoming a seafarer and she went to Naval School for three years and committed to a life and career at sea (ITF, 2005c). Vanesa was and continues to be an advocate for women on board ships (ITF, 2005c). She has witnessed two cases of women colleagues being sexually harassed at work. As for herself, she is the only woman among 13 men on her ship and after some mishaps in the beginning,

she has now found a friendly workplace (ITF, 2005c).

Welcome to My World

It is estimated that there are currently 25 000 women seafarers (ITF, 2005c). While women continue to enter the seafaring profession at its lowest rungs, their presence is becoming increasingly visible on cruise ships, cargo vessels and at ports around the world (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). In the 2000 SIRC/ILO survey conducted, researchers found that only six per cent of these women were employed on cargo ships, while 68% of the women worked on ferries and the remaining 26% were employed on cruise liners (Anon, 2003). Christine Chin (2008) believes that it is becoming common in a changing environment for an increasing number of women to be gainfully employed in the industry on either cruise ships, passenger ships or ferries. There are specific problems that women seafarers experience on board.

The extract given below is from an interview with a female seafarer who worked onboard cruise liners that passed through the Port City of Durban in 2012/2013. The extracts best describe the loneliness and isolation that female seafarers experience when they are separated from their children for extended periods. The long absence from their home is one of the major contributing factors that results in larger numbers of women not choosing to pursue a career at sea (N. Singh, 2011). One of the women seafarers interviewed says:

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

Men Own the Sea

Women have always played an important role in the industry, however small. In 1603 four German captains were women; WWII/ the Second World War saw women leading war ships into battle (Anon, 2003, p.7), 1997, saw one women chief officer employed by BP Shipping, supposedly one of the most progressive companies in the UK (Couper, Walsh, Stanberry, & Boerne, 1999, p. 21). But unfortunately the society reflects what the mode of production reflects with nothing new or contrary. The maritime industry is in no way opposite to the shore where male domination prevails. The seafaring industry has been deemed to be historically male dominated (Chin, 2008, p. 21). One of the challenges that women face is accessing employment on board ships. In some countries maritime institutions are not allowed to recruit

women (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). In the 1980s China's largest shipping company stopped employing women on cargo ships. They had been employed on cargo ships for extended periods of time, prior to the 1980s (Chin, 2008, p. 11). Women who complete navigation courses (ITF Seafarers, 2012f) face discrimination from prospective employers who are reluctant to employ women (Finke, 2012). Evident in male dominated industries is female seafarers receiving lower rates of remuneration for equal work (Finke, 2012; ITF Seafarers, 2012f).

In India in 1998, statistics indicate that there were 43000 seafarers registered. Of these seafarers, only 3 were women (Anon, 2003). In China, one of its leading shipping companies was renowned for the employment of women only, with only female officers onboard (Anon, 2003, p. 11). Today the landscape has changed; the very same company now only employs 150 women and they are largely concentrated in the hospitality sector on ships (Anon, 2003, p. 11). Women's inclusion and exclusion in the maritime sector is often dictated by gender constructs, labour demand and low wages. These trends are similar to those seen in other traditionally male oriented sectors, where women are the first to be fired and the last to be hired. The maritime industries are also the best replica of the male dominated societies on shore.

Welcome Back to the Female Seafarers

In China the lack of suitable male candidates have altered recruitment

policies which has steered in the direction of women and they have been actively recruiting women since 2000 (Anon, 2003, p. 13). Despite these efforts and advances, few women are employed in senior positions amongst the deck and engine rooms (Couper et al., 1999, p. 21). Women's participation in the industry is being actively encouraged by Maritime programmes (DUT, 2012; Maritime-Executive, 2010; SAMTRA, 2013). According to an International Labour Publication, *Women Seafarers: Global Employment Policies and Practices*, maritime and nautical school enrolments in 1998 indicate that for every 95 males registered at a maritime college five females are registered in Germany and 96 male students are admitted to four females in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Anon, 2003, p. 13).

It can be argued that the doors of the seafaring profession have swung open for women due to the current shortage of labour at sea (ITF Seafarers, 2003e). The entry of women into the industry is a result of the shortage highlighted in 2000. 'The 2000 BIMCO/ISF reported a 4% shortage of officers at sea' (Thomas, 2004, p. 309). This shortage of officers will experience further growth if the marine industry does not adhere to the call for a new rank to be added in order to fill a need created by the increased administration (Singh, 2013). These changes are due to the modifications to the shipping company's administration and the accountability of senior officers on ships (Singh, 2013). Additional reason for shortages is

unprecedented levels of economic growth in Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (Anon b, 2010. P10). The direct result has been the expansion of the world maritime cargo movement and increased world commercial fleets (Anon b, 2010). According to the SIRC/ILO survey, pressure from global forces and a change in political direction towards empowering women in the 1990's saw the face of the changing maritime industry (Anon, 2003).

Employers who have hired female seafarers have indicated a high level of satisfaction with them (Thomas, 2004, p. 309). A report that some employers are encouraging women to enter the profession in large numbers is not always true.

If the labour shortage is to be addressed female seafarers need to be seen as an untapped resource that is currently being under-utilized. Thomas (2004) indicates that female seafarers can be the solution to the labour shortage in the seafaring profession. The challenge is that most of these women are confined to gendered roles on board the ships (Chin, 2008, p. 21). Women are usually employed to work in the servicing division of the cruise liners, such as receptionists and waitresses (Chin, 2008, p. 21). Thomas (2004), Chin (2008) and Ruggunan (2008) have all indicated that most women are found employed in the hotels on board passenger and cruise liners.

Women Seafarers and Flags of Convenience

Employment on FOC vessels is amongst the worst paid and least protected

of jobs for women at sea (George, 2011). Because of the low pay and easier accessibility to employment on FOC registered vessels, women who seek employment here tend to be younger, and fewer are officers than their male crew mates (ITFSeafarers, 2012f). Women seafarers work mainly on Flags Of Convenience (FOC) vessels (Couper et al., 1999, p. 21). FOC vessels are described as a ship that is 'one that flies the flag of a country other than the country of ownership' (ITFglobal.org, 2012a). By registering as an FOC vessel, the owners are able to avoid lengthy bureaucratic processes and avoid high financial accountability and liability (Sharda, 2012). This avoidance can result in human rights and human labour exploitation; mainly because the labour laws in the FOC states are relatively flexible and high levels of unemployment are evident (Sharda, 2012). Ship owners can avoid strict labour laws and minimum wages regulations set by the maritime industry of the said 'home state' (Smita, 2011) vulnerable jobseekers are exploited.

These FOC registered vessels present a challenge for female seafarers seeking employment on board ships which provide a living wage (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). FOC registered vessels can have a significant impact on the quality of life for seafarers both at sea and on land; they are often accused of having poor living conditions on board, paying low wages and offering little job security (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). On board these vessels, working hours are longer, the

crew is smaller and people employed on board vessels are at times coerced into doing the work of port workers. (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). When seafarers are expected to assume or perform the duties of port workers, this can result in tension between the two and this in turn can result in large numbers of port workers losing their jobs (ITFglobal.org, 2012b). In most instances when this occurs, it is the women port-workers who are the first to lose their jobs (Thomas, 2004).

Gender Bias and Sexual Harassment

The low number of women on board cargo, war and merchant vessels is a contributory factor to women's vulnerability on board these vessels and they are subjected to discrimination and harassment (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). Unions for seafarers are actively involved and they are well aware of the vulnerable position of female seafarers on board these vessels and efforts are being made to ensure their protection and wellbeing (Finke, 2012). But to what extent, it has been implemented and what steps are taken or to be taken to prevent these gender bias, discrimination and sexual harassment are questionable. Even on land where women get immediate access to police and legal aids, these discriminations still continue and so no wonder about its continuance on board which is a separate island where access to legal aids is not immediately possible. When ships take a long time to reach the shore, the on board officers seek the way of peaceful compliance between the offenders and oppressed which always

end at loss for female seafarers. The legal system protecting women differs nation to nation and booking the culprits and violators under justice is like a sort of metaphysical activity for women seafarers. The following testimony given below from a woman seafarer is standing example of gender bias and sexual harassment.

When you are at sea, you get extremely lonely as a woman. Men are very lonely and make many advances on women. Sometimes your best protection when you are on board a ship is to find a male partner, as a way of protection against the other men. For me this has been the way that I cope. If I am on a ship for nine months, I often find a boyfriend. When the other men on board the ship know that you are with someone, they will not make sexual advances towards you. I know what you must think, but I have to do this. I would rather have a short-term relationship with one man than be harassed by all the men (*Female Seafarer no. 6 Interviewed*, 19 September 2012).

As Lenin says "There is no standard moral values", here the prevailing situation forces them into short term relationships; though they want to be loyal to their husbands, the vulnerability of being a woman forces them into short term relationship with a male on board to avoid unnecessary encounter with other males. The collective consciousness of their family and their relationship with their husbands and security driven short term

relationships here on board put them in the mental dilemma that causes severe depression that often lasts for the rest of their lives. The fight between the need and the moral values cum love completely pushes them to be a psychological patient and the remnants of this lasts long and leaves its imprints forever in their lives.

Trade Unions and Women Seafarers

In the ship, though no unions can be active to demand the rights of women, trade unions on shore play a vital role in doing so. Their role is limited, but effective. Trade Unions have played an important role in the protection, arrival and continued presence of women seafarers on ships at sea (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). After the slow and continued decline of worldwide oppression, gender biased employment, and other forms of discrimination, different forms of prejudice are gradually being confronted head on. Women are beginning to enter areas of work that were historically reserved for their male counterparts (Anon, 2003). Trade unions play an important role in opening up the seafaring profession to women along with trying to securing the rights that they can access as unionized employees at sea (ITF Seafarers, 2012f). The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been in existence since 1896 and represents, alongside ITF affiliated unions, over 600,000 seafarers (ITFglobal.org, 2012d).

The ITF is represented nationwide and its aim is to improve conditions for seafarers of all nationalities and gender

(ITFglobal.org, 2012d). ITF continues to fight for adequate regulation in the shipping industry which in turn protects the interests and rights of the seafarers (ITFglobal.org, 2012d). Nautilus International and ITF affiliated union have very strong policies that protect women seafarers (Nautilus, 2012d). It not only strives for equal opportunity for women, they also acknowledge that women are exposed to different stressors whilst working on board ships. This union has a dedicated telephone line, managed by female union employees, that assist with gender specific issues (Nautilus, 2009e, p. 31). It is committed to attracting an increasing number of female seafarers into the maritime industry and has incentivised women with the Victoria Drummond Award. This is awarded every four years to a female seafarer for significant achievement in any of a wide range of skills within the maritime industry (Nautilus, 2009e, p. 62). Although unions represent women at sea, there are still several challenges they face in a male dominated environment as discussed here in this paper.

Men and Women on Board Ships

Hansen and Jensen (1989) find that engine rooms are male-dominated with high levels of alcohol and tobacco consumption. The consumption of alcohol increases the risk of onboard fatalities (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). When small numbers of female seafarers enter these male dominated areas on the ship they often adopt the very same unhealthy and

risky male behaviour. The assimilation of masculine strategies is used to present themselves in a more acceptable way to their fellow male workers. Unhealthy behaviour and substance abuse can be a problem for both genders. A female seafarer who was interviewed said that the men and women drink and smoke heavily on board the ship. It is a way of escaping the loneliness and forgetting. Few women seafarers do not smoke or drink because it is expensive and they wanted to save money for their family.

The number of fatal accidents both at sea and on land is high among female seafarers (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). This may be as a result of them being influenced by their occupation towards hazardous behaviour and a high risk lifestyle, but people with a high risk lifestyle may just be attracted by or forced into high risk jobs such as traditional male jobs at sea (Hansen & Jensen, 1989). Both women and men in the maritime profession also are in a high-risk group for suicides (Burr, 2007). An Australian based research study indicated that the biggest cause of stress resulted from the relationship between home and work and that family problems were also the root cause for suicide amongst seafarers at sea (ITF, 2002h). Suicide risks among seafarers are thought to be linked with easy access to a means of suicide (drowning), selection effects in people who go to sea, long-term separation from family and social networks, heavy alcohol consumption and psychoses (Burr, 2007, p. 54). The risk of suicide due to emotional

pressure arising from familial separation is certainly an issue. Moreover the gender bias that is among the seafarers pushes the women seafarers into this fatal decision immediately. When a seafarer was interviewed, she described the suicide of her colleague from the Philippines.

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

Gender

Women have always been, and continue to be, important contributors to the seafaring profession. Their roles are critical in the transformation of the industry. Women have faced challenges in both historical and current context when occupying professions in the maritime sector. In particular, women from India, Philippines, China, South Korea, South America and Asia face difficulties in terms of unfamiliar cultural contexts when

embarking on a profession at sea (Thomas, 2004, p. 311). The perceived incompatibility of a career at sea, the role of motherhood, the women's gendered role within the family and her role as a wife and mother places an additional burden and stress on female seafarers. Despite woman seafarer's absence from her home for a long time, she must come home to take over when she is here. She should use the time to rest, but there is no rest for her. She must work on the ship and she must work at home.

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

If I could earn the same amount of money at home I would never work on a ship. I would be prepared to do anything in my country. The problem is that there are no jobs. I had no choice. If I was not at work at sea my family would starve, we would be out on the streets. My family is respected now. They are respected because they have money in a poor community. When I go home, the women welcome me; the men are indifferent because they feel that I am doing a man's job. I am a mother I have to do what I can to support my family. I pay my brother and his wife to take care of my children. If I did not have

them I would not be able to leave for work. I give my brother everything I earn. Every month 80% of my salary is paid to him. I receive 20% in cash on the ship. I save everything. I have to hide this money from my brother. I am saving this money to start a shop at home in a few years. Sometimes I receive tips on board the ship and I save this. I do not buy toiletries, when I clean the room after a cruise people leave things behind and I collect this and use it. I do not use the laundry facilities on the ship; I wash my own clothes by hand and iron them myself (*Female Seafarer no. 5 Interviewed*, 19 November 2012).

The colour of the skin is also a main factor in gender bias. Female Seafarers with lighter skin tones are usually placed in frontline jobs such as the information desks whereas, women with darker skin tones are 'hidden, in behind the scenes' cleaning and catering jobs (Chin, 2008, p. 21). Issues of gender equity and linkages between caste-based systems that are based on skin tone are still prevalent in certain countries and there is evidence of these practices influencing the types of employment allocated to women in the maritime sector.

Pregnant Women at Sea

The rights of women at sea are governed by a series of laws. They are determined by the laws of their birth country, if and when they are sailing on a ship of their home country (Finke, 2012). Alternatively and in some cases, this could be in addition to the rights guaranteed to them by the employer. Those that are

members of unions will also be protected under their 'union's collective bargaining agreements' (Finke, 2012). If a female seafarer works on a ship that does not belong to their home country, also known as a 'Flag of Convenience vessel', the members have rights that are accorded by that particular country's flag 'which might not give any maternity rights at all' (ITF, 2012g). The ITF does provide basic and minimum rights for seafarers, both men and women (ITF, 2012g). ITF-approved agreements for merchant vessels stipulate that pregnant seafarers must be repatriated at the cost of the company must receive two months full pay in compensation. (ITF, 2012g).

These minimum rights depend on a new set of principles and qualifiers, introduced in the 1990's and these include: The timing of the repatriation may vary depending on where you work and your stage of pregnancy; where the ship is trading coastally, or where a doctor is on board, it is generally safer for pregnant women to work later into a pregnancy - in Britain, this is up to 28 weeks (ITF, 2012g). However, if working on deep-sea vessels or very high speed craft, the risks need to be assessed carefully (ITF, 2012g). Theoretically, pregnancy should never be treated as a disciplinary offence (ITF, 2012g). Current practices such as requiring pregnancy testing before offering employment to women violate International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 183 (ITF, 2012g).

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

In an interview with a female engineer that was conducted at the Sailors Society in Umbilo Road, Durban, (who wanted to remain anonymous) she did not disclose the name of her company. The 28-year-old woman was from Malawi. She obtained funding to read for an engineering degree in Amsterdam. After she completed her degree in engineering, she made applications for employment. Through her networks in Amsterdam, she became aware of opportunities for employment at sea. This job required further training at a Maritime college. Securing the necessary funds, she pursued her studies. At the age of 24 she managed to secure an entry level job on board a ship. This was a very difficult choice for her as she had already been away from her family home in Malawi for six years. She decided to make a trip home before she began her life at sea. When she returned to Malawi, she succumbed to the family and community pressure and wed her current

husband whom her family had selected for her. After her three-month stay at home, she was off to South Africa where she would board a ship and set sail. She was about to begin her career at sea. Although this was an entry-level position and she had many hours of training ahead of her she had secured a position in the engineering department. Her first job at sea was going to be ten months. Ten months away from her husband and her family. She left with excitement and was happy to be earning in an international currency. She worked hard in the beginning and after three weeks at sea she had taken ill. Other seafarers told her that it was common and she would soon be well again, once she had found her sea legs. She waited patiently for her health to improve. After three days she began to feel worse and decided to visit the ship's doctor. She soon discovered that she was pregnant and now she did not know what next. Her whole world began to crumble around her. She had never intended on starting a family so soon. What was she going to do, would she give birth on board the ship, would she be fired, would this be the end of her life at sea? (Burr, 2007)

Communication with her family was not always easy. It depended on where they were, how close they were to a port and a series of other factors. It was often expensive at sea and therefore limited to email communication. She spoke to her Captain and she was granted an unpaid leave of absence. When she was eight months pregnant the ship would dock in South Africa. She was to disembark and

the company would cover her costs to return home. She would then be entitled to maternity leave for a period of twelve weeks. Thereafter she was expected to return to the ship. She would be notified of the Port closer to the time. She thought she was lucky that she is an engineer and had skills. And she was not sure whether she would have been as lucky if she had been employed as hotel staff (Burr, 2007).

Female seafarers' responses regarding their knowledge of their companies maternity policies, affirms Belcher's (2003.P 60) research. It is evident that very few women know what their maternity rights are; or they are not properly informed about their rights. Belcher (2003: 60) further points out those women are required to take pregnancy tests before joining crew ships. This failure of companies to brief women on their basic rights could be viewed as a human rights violation on its own. An ITF resource book for trade union negotiators in the transport sector points out the human rights violation for pregnant women, that 16% were not entitled to maternity leave with cash benefits, 30% stated that pregnant employees did not have the right to guaranteed job transfers without loss of earnings and 14% had restrictions imposed upon them after returning from maternity leave. (Finke, 2012)

Although all ships carry a medical officer onboard, women complain that their roster does not always coincide with that of the medical officer, therefore making it at times difficult to seek medical

attention (Belcher, 2003, p. 60). When a seafarer does require some type of medical help or advice whilst on duty, their supervisor has to sign a form which indicates the reason for medical consultation and, this can become a problem in those instances where a female seafarer would prefer to keep her reasons for seeking medical help confidential (Belcher, 2003, p. 59). Female seafarers have also reported similar insensitivity and logistical problems in obtaining and disposing of female sanitary products, and this can subsequently result in stress (Belcher, 2003, p. 62). In an informal discussion conducted with a male seafarer active in the oil industry, the respondent revealed 'I suppose they can throw it overboard'. Similarly, a female seafarer said that they were told to keep their 'feminine products' sealed in plastic bags until it can be disposed of on land (*Female Seafarer no. 3 Interviewed*, 16 February 2013). This clearly indicates that the profession is highly male centred and in no way are the facilities arranged nor is she considered an equal employee of a ship.

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

Both, I had to work harder initially to "prove" myself to the male working population. One job I had working for — , I earned considerably less than my male work colleagues earned, and never received a pay rise for extra tickets. Some of the male management also tried to run me off... because it wasn't 'appropriate' for a woman to be doing the job I was doing. ...'the common problems women experience whilst working offshore' is non-acceptance and that she has heard 'sexual rumours'(Respondent-no.9, 2013).

Respondents were asked to answer to the following: 'If you had a daughter, would you advise her to become a seafarer?' Out of the twelve respondents two said 'yes', four said 'no' and six did not respond as they did not have children (SurveyMonkey, 2013). Another respondent stated that although she does not have a daughter but a son: 'I don't think I want my son to go to sea! It's not the industry we once had' (Respondent-no.5, 2013). Another respondent said that she was happy to recommend seafaring for her daughter, because, '[it is a] good job, good money' (Respondent-no.1, 2013).

Coping Strategies

According to Klein (2001, p. 90) both men and women often have to pay to secure employment cruise ships. The dream of a good job, with a secure income outweighs the costs and their long absence away from their family, friends and home. However when they arrive on board ships

they are faced with a different reality. A reality that promises 12-14 hours of work a day, seven days a week with little or no time for themselves (R. Klein, 2001, p. 92). Loneliness and an isolated work environment becomes a reality very early into their employment (ITF, 2002h). Bribery and corruption on board these ships are rife. Seafarers are forced to succumb to bribes to secure efficient and timeouts laundry service, suitable accommodation and a salary that feeds their family (R. Klein, 2001, p. 100). This point is well substantiated by the quote of one woman seafarer interviewed. She says:

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

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

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

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

In addition to deriving emotional pleasure from focusing on the job at hand, regular communication with family or loved-ones can help mitigate the feelings

of deprivation and with the rapid development of ICTs this can allow for sustained and effective 'cyber parenting'. Although working at sea can be an interesting and gratifying occupation it can subsequently take its toll on the seafarer's social and family life (ITF, 2002h). In the event that the seafarer is unable to overcome feelings of isolation, their workplace becomes a stressful environment (ITF, 2002h). This feeling of isolation can be addressed if the ship owners are cognizant and responsive to the needs of their maritime workers. According to the Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) a stable content seafarer is a productive seafarer. The SIRC claims that there are three main psychological problems which seafarers develop and these are: loneliness, homesickness and "burn out". Recent research approaches demonstrate that qualitative research is increasingly becoming a fundamental tool to give the seafarers a platform to articulate themselves as to how they cope with these stressors. Unlike previous quantitative approaches, which only track trends (such as number of attempted suicides), qualitative data collection allows for the expression of opinions and narratives that can subsequently offer explanations for trends in quantitative data (Bailey, 20 May 2007, p. 10).

Recommendations & Conclusions

The ITF and the ILO along with trade unions have highlighted a series of key areas that remain a priority. These include the following:

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

Since 2000 the ITF have negotiated with the cruise ship industry, which has a reputation for the most human rights abuses, for the implementation and realization of women's rights. Although agreements differ slightly from cruise ship to cruise ship, the standard ITF approach is to try and realize a work environment in which women are free from all forms of harassment such as bullying, sexual and racial abuse (ITF, 2012i). ITF cruise line policies also state that the normal hours of duty should be eight hours per day, five days a week, with a 10 hour rest period per 24 hour period; currently it is 77 hours in a seven-day period (ITF, 2012i). In the event that any subsequent hours are worked, overtime has to be paid (ITF, 2012i). Even with these changes, the environment is not easy and seafarers have to adapt and learn to cope. They are forced to cope with the long absences from home, long working hours, limited rest periods, gender discrimination, limited benefits, limited medical and recreational facilities and loneliness.

Though many recommendations are made, proposed and implemented, it is the male dominated society that holds the

rope. What is going on in a seafarer's life is nothing but the reflection of what is going on in the land. Seafaring is in no way an option to this male dominated society. Till the male dominated sphere and mode of production is deconstructed, these appear to be no chance for meaningful change.

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