



Maritime Security Briefings

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Women at Sea: Is sea-blindness gendered?

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Statistics from the International Transport Workers' Federation indicate that as little as two per cent of the maritime workforce is made up of women. According to data published by the International Labour Organisation in 2003 the vast majority of these women, 94 per cent, work on passenger ships such as ferries and cruise liners, often in the service roles that are also available on land. It is only the remaining six per cent who are employed as crew of cargo vessels.

More recently, a South African female captain of a container ship, Zetta Gous-Conradie, helped to foil an attack by sea criminals in Nigerian waters. Gous-Conradie's employee records show that she has been at work as a seafarer for more than thirteen years. Her record and actions defy the idea that female seafarers are condemned to ferries and cruise liners. Is it time to revise our ideas on the role of women at sea?

Gous-Conradie's rise through the ranks still appears to be an exception to the rule. In several countries, maritime training institutions will not accept women, or, if they do, will offer them a shorter list of course options than that available to men. If they yet manage to qualify, women experience discrimination from employers who prefer to hire men. If, however, they do make it on-board a cargo vessel, women face challenges in being accepted by the predominantly male crews, in having to prove that they are able to match the physical demands of the work, and may then still be subjected to sexual harassment, often explained by the sexes living in close quarters. Further, women's rights are not adequately protected with provisions around maternity being particularly troublesome.

While some efforts have been made to encourage women into seafaring, the sea space appears to have fallen largely outside of conversations around gender equality and representation. Sea-blindness apparently extends to social and gender issues also.

The role of women at sea appears to be diminished. This may be because the sea is a securitised space, or because of the social constructs that imply bias against women in certain professions.

Increasingly, however, changing times are illustrating that previously accepted stereotypes are not necessarily valid, and that women can equal men in all respects. While access to the seas has been inherently restricted, the maritime industry seems to be lagging behind global shifts toward gender equality in the work place and in society. While we now begin to see more women represented in jobs that have previously been held men, such as in the science and technology industries, in building and construction, and even agriculture, this trend has been land-bound, and does not appear to have extended to sea.

It is time that we begin to address the gendered aspect of sea-blindness also?

If you're interested to know more about the issues discussed in this briefing, please contact the author, lisa.otto@coventry.ac.uk at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations.