

SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN SEAFARERS IN THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE

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"Nothing is more important in economic development than women's participation"- Amartya Kumar Sen

Abstract

Considering the growing global demand for seafarers and a greater need for women to contribute towards national output, this paper emphasises the need for a increased participation of women in seafaring jobs. Though international and national organisations are encouraging young women to take up a career in the maritime sector, unless a gender sensitive approach is employed to look into the emotional and physical challenges faced by women seafarers, these attempts will not result in desired outcomes. Higher participation of women can be expected only if a gender sensitive working atmosphere is created on board and an appropriate family support system is ensured on the shore.

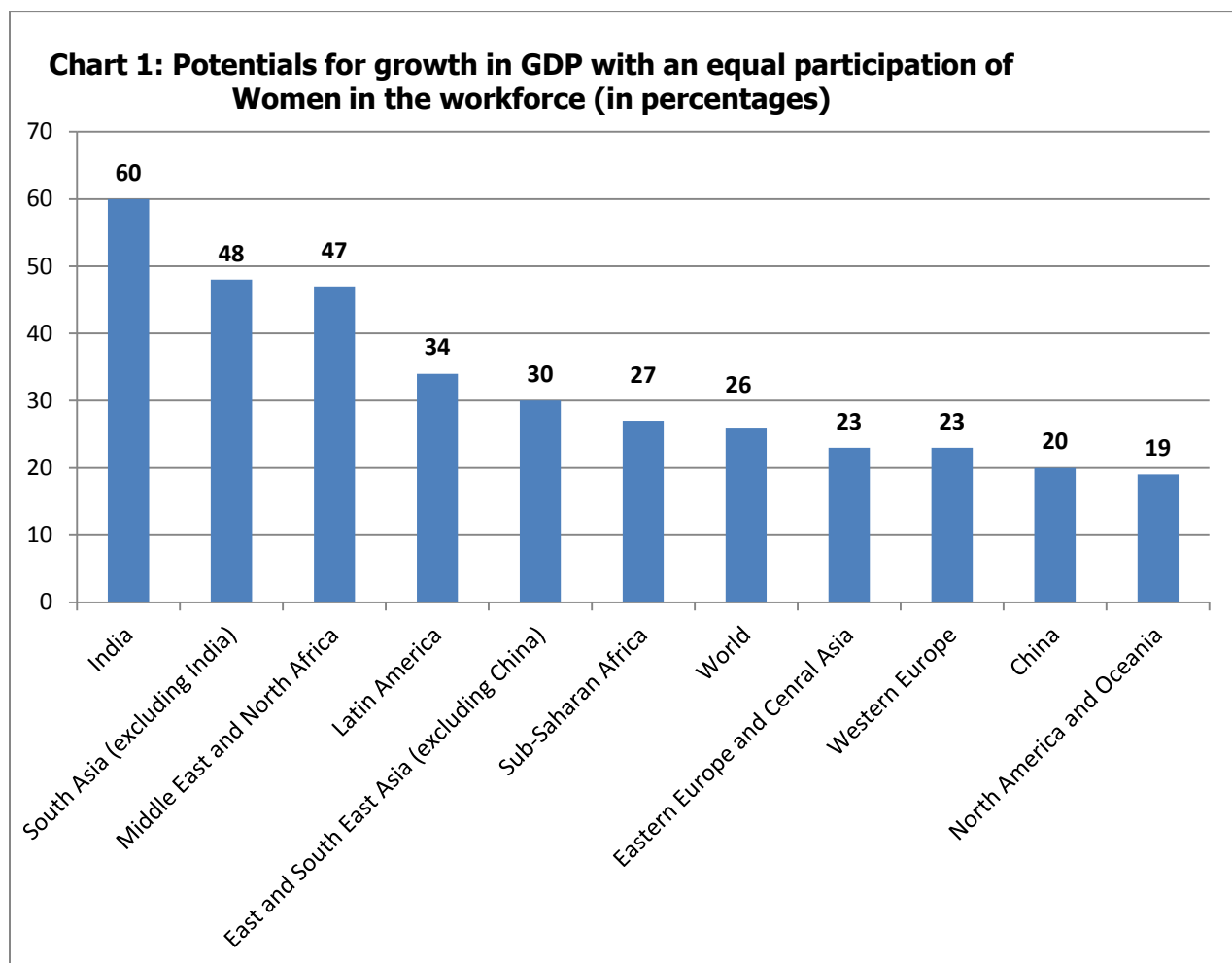
Keywords: *Seafarers, Women, Workforce*

Introduction

The role of women in facilitating socio-economic development of any society is widely accepted by both scholars and laymen. However, for a long time, women's role has been limited to daily chores of household activities. In developed and developing societies, the need for contributing towards economic betterment of the families necessitated women to take up economically productive activities outside homes. Mostly their activities have been limited to physically less strenuous jobs that enable them to shoulder multiple roles within the family and outside. Recently the need for women to take up economically productive and challenging jobs outside the family has increased. However, the proportion of women express willing to join many challenging professions is very meager and shipping sector is one among them. This paper highlights the professional challenges faced by women seafarers, and suggests that there is a need for encouraging and providing support systems for youngsters to embrace seafaring jobs considering the growing demand for seafarers in the maritime industry. It argues that such participation of women workforce in turn adds to the national productivity of the country.

Participation of Women in the Workforce

The participation of women in economically productive activities contributes towards betterment of the family and society. A recent study conducted by McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) ⁽¹⁾ has brought out potentialities for improving current GDP to a higher level with greater participation of women. Though there is an equal proportion of men and women in the working age population in various countries, the participation of the women in the workforce is less and therefore, their contribution to the economically productive activities and GDP is also less.



Source: McKinsey Global Institute Report 2015

Chart 1 indicates that if women are encouraged to participate in the economy identical to that of men, there is a potential for improving the world workforce by 26 per cent. India has the highest potential for improving the women workforce, that is, by 60 per cent. According to the study carried out by McKinsey in 2014, women constitute half of the world's working age

population; but they contribute only 37 per cent of global GDP. In a developing country like India, the share of economically productive women, contributing towards GDP, is only 17 per cent. The following table 1 indicates the potentials for GDP growth by 2025 and is expressed in trillion dollars as per 2014.

An equal participation of women in the workforce can add to \$28 trillion to annual global GDP in 2025, which is equivalent to the combined US and China economies today. According to the study, \$12 trillion could be added by 2025 if all countries matched their best-in-region country in progress toward gender parity. It indicates that 240 million workers can be potentially added through increased female participation.

Table 1: Region-wise Potentials for GDP Growth by 2025

Region	Trillion \$ 2014
India	2.9
South Asia (excluding India)	0.4
Middle East and North Africa	2.7
Latin America	2.6
East and South East Asia (excluding China)	3.3
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.7
North America and Oceania	5.3
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	1.1
Western Europe	5.1
China	4.2
World	28.4

Source: McKinsey Global Institute Report 2015

The data points towards the importance of encouraging women to break the shackles of traditional structures and enter into a wide spectrum of areas that remained beyond the reach of women for a long time. Maritime sector is one among such areas that remained as an exclusive domain of men for many years. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO), United Nations specialised agency for maritime regulations, has been active in promoting the participation and advancement of women in all areas of maritime sector by encouraging them to undergo various maritime training programs.

Women as Seafarers

Being a highly adventurous and fascinating job, seafaring continues to be a male bastion and remains one of the least sought after jobs by women throughout the world. In a traditionally male dominated working environment, the presence of women on the board was generally not welcomed and often, apprehensions and prejudices had forbidden their entry into this trade. On

the one side, there were widespread myths propagating that the very presence of women on the board would invite wrath of the sea and on the other side, the women were looked down upon as weaker and incapable of performing tasks which are considered as tough and masculine. It is no wonder to note that the term 'seaman' was replaced only in 2005 in the 294th session of International Labour Organisation (ILO) where the term 'seafarer' was coined to make a gender neutral terminology for the sailors⁽²⁾.

The first historical account of a woman seafarer is that of Mary Ann Talbot, an English woman who disguised as a seaman during the Napoleonic wars. Robert S Kirby has immortalized her struggles and tragic life history in the book 'The Life and Surprising Adventures of Mary Ann Talbot, in the Name of John Taylor' authored in 1804⁽³⁾. It was only in 1935 that Capt. Anne Schetinina from Russia assumed the official status of captaincy for the first time in the history. Gaining inspiration from her, many women, especially from UK and Holland, joined seafaring profession during the Second World War⁽⁴⁾. The most important step to encourage the women participation in this direction was the establishment of US Merchant Marine Academy in 1974.

As per the statistics provided by ILO, 1.5 million seafarers daily serve on a worldwide fleet of over one lakh ships⁽⁵⁾ that transport more than 90 per cent of the world trade and the share of women is only a meager two percent of the total world maritime workforce. Studies have indicated that 94 per cent of these women are employed in physically less strenuous jobs, basically non technical sectors of the ship and many of them work as stewardesses, cooks, cleaners etc, of passenger ships (68 per cent ferries and 26 per cent cruise ships)⁽⁶⁾. Only six per cent work on cargo ships such as container ships and oil tankers that demand physical labour. These studies also point out that among various cadres within the ship, women constitute only seven per cent of officers whereas more than 40 percent of men work in this cadre, pointing at the skewed distribution of power and status on gender lines in this industry. The data pertaining to India also corroborates with the international figures indicating miniscule presence of women among the seafaring community. It was reported that in 1998, there were only three Indian women out of 43,000 registered seafarers⁽⁷⁾ and currently, there are over 86,000 registered Indian national seafarers and the women constitute only 0.29 per cent of the same⁽⁸⁾, indicating their tough voyage in this industry.

Review of Literature

A number of studies have brought out the physical and emotional problems that are likely to adversely affect the seafarers generally and women seafarers specifically. In a study⁽⁹⁾ carried out on the health status of the seafaring women in Denmark, it is indicated that female seafarers entering traditional male jobs had a high risk of fatal accidents, not only at sea, but also ashore. The study also highlight that risk of fatal accidents in the workplace among female seafarers was found to be even higher than among Danish male seafarers and hence it points towards the urgent necessity of adopting a differential treatment of women seafarers to

address their issues. The study argued that generally people with a high risk lifestyle are attracted to or forced into high risk jobs such as traditional male jobs at sea.

An examination into the occupational health hazards of Swedish seafarers stated that in spite of taking a health related selection into the occupation, constantly exposing the mariners to adverse working conditions contributes towards high morbidity and mortality⁽¹⁰⁾. Another study⁽¹¹⁾ conducted to capture the perception of the young women seafarers argued that many of them have expressed their concerns to take up profession as seafarers and many of them found it difficult to be in the job for a long time. Most women (57.14 per cent) believed that they were discriminated against men and were not regarded as good workers from an equal perspective. As many as 47.61 per cent perceived that sexual harassment is an important problem, followed by difficulties in operating mechanical equipment (23.80 per cent), feeling of isolation (14.28 per cent), risks arise from accidents (14.28 per cent), fatigue (9.52 per cent) and increased workload (4.76 per cent). Attrition is an important concern for women seafarers and as high as 90 per cent indicated that women were likely to quit jobs due to familial compulsions.

Considering the gravity of the issues faced by women seafarers, a health and welfare survey⁽¹²⁾ has been carried out by International Maritime Health Association (IMHA), International Seafarers Welfare Assistance and Network (ISWAN), International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) and Seafarers Hospital Society (SHS) in 2014 and 2015 on women seafarers from 54 countries. This study on the occupational health hazards indicated that 47 per cent identified joint/ back pain and 43 per cent mentioned stress/ depression/ anxiety as the major challenges faced. The study recommended that adoption of a range of relatively straight forward and inexpensive interventions are required. Specific interventions addressing the problems of joint/ back pain, mental health, nutrition and gynecological complaints are required to be implemented. It also recommended certain measures for disposing sanitary waste for all ships and improved availability of female specific products in port shops.

Since mariners are exposed to high risks to life due to working in challenging environment, both the government and the shipping companies need to initiate seafarer friendly systems to encourage their participation. Proper diffusion of positive experiences of companies employing women seafarers, and timely execution of policies addressing sexual harassment should be undertaken by all crewing and shipping companies from time to time. In order to reduce the chances of loneliness in the working environment, the female crew members may be placed on vessels along with other female mariners onboard and international institutions may develop and promote policies relating to pregnancy and maternity benefits for seafaring women. Such a proactive role played by a number of agencies can ensure higher recruitment of women seafarers and retention of existing women seafarers in the future.

Market for Seafarers

The international market for seafarers can be observed by examining the demand for and supply of seafarers globally. A study⁽¹³⁾ has been conducted by Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), the world's largest shipping association and International Shipping Federation (ISF) looking into the Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping (STCW) certificate holders across the world and it indicates that there is a supply of 624,000 officers and 747,000 ratings globally.

Table 2: Global Supply of Seafarers in 2010

Area	Current supply of seafarers				
	Officers ('000s)	Percentage	Ratings ('000s)	Percentage	Total ('000s)
OECD countries	184	29.4	143	19.2	327
Eastern Europe	127	20.3	109	14.6	236
Africa/ Latin America	50	8.0	112	15.0	162
Far East	184	29.4	275	36.7	459
Indian Sub continent	80	12.8	108	14.5	188
All National Groups	624	100	747	100	1371

Source: BIMCO/ISF

Table 2 indicates that far eastern countries have high presence of seafarers comprising both officers and ratings. The most important countries among the far eastern region contributing workforce towards seafaring jobs are Philippines, Indonesia, China, and Korea. India has a total supply of 1,88,000 seafarers comprising of 12.8 per cent of the seafaring officers and 14.5 per cent of the ratings. As per a study conducted by women's wing of International Transport Federation, the mariner women's participation in India is as low as 0.29 per cent of the total sea farers of the country, which is considerably lower than the global two per cent figure.

A global demand for seafarers had been estimated on the basis of a detailed review of the number, size, and types of ships in the world fleet and revised estimates of the manning levels and back up ratio currently applicable to different national fleets. The study by BIMCO/ISF, by reviewing the data supplied by 100 major companies and information from national administrations and a crewing expert's survey, a demand of about 637,000 officers and 747,000 ratings by the year 2010 was expected, which indicated a shortage of about two per cent of officers which was not a serious recruitment problem. Considering the demand for goods globally, an annual growth rate of 2.3 per cent in the number of ships in the world fleet is expected. The study indicated that by 2020, there would be a shortage in the supply of seafarers by 9 per cent and the shortage is expected to be widened in future unless adequate measures are taken to increase the supply. The study points towards the need for bridging the

gap between the demand and supply to meet the industry requirements of well qualified and high caliber seafarers capable of adopting to a wide range of challenging tasks. The shortages in labour force need to be rectified by encouraging youngsters to take up a profession in the maritime sector and women remain as an untapped resource.

The report published in 2010 by BIMCO and ISF indicate that in spite of the financial crisis and global recession, there is a severe shortage of officers, which can be met only by recruiting more women. The report points out that women with their strong qualities such as dedication to work, discipline, and organisational skills are better suitable for everyday chores within a ship. Moreover, the advancement in technology has made the seafarer jobs less strenuous and physically demanding today than earlier times. Various national and international organisations have passed resolutions to create sound working and living environment in shipping industry from time to time to make the seafaring job more attractive and safer for women. For example, Maritime Labour Convention 2006⁽¹⁴⁾ has consolidated and revised all ILO Conventions and Recommendations relating to seafarers and their rights with an intention to enhance women participation in this field, but it does not provide any special provision for the protection of women seafarers against gender discrimination and maintains silence on special challenges such as, harassment, bullying and so on⁽¹⁵⁾.

Challenges Ahead

Seafarer's job is challenging and not an easy one. Besides a highly demanding physical working atmosphere, a seafarer faces several perils of the sea including psychological distress emerging from an isolated life away from the land and the family. Given the ubiquitous nature of gender discrimination in every work place, women in the shipping industry too face several problems such as sexual harassment and bullying, along with a number of challenges exclusive for women such as pregnancy, maternity, menstruation, hygiene, privacy etc⁽¹⁶⁾. Above all these difficulties, there is a pressure to prove their ability by having to work harder to fight the lingering sexual stereotypes of colleagues who treat them as inferior mortals. These stereotypical impressions are so powerful that certain shipping company managers believe that employing women onboard is more troublesome than it's worth in the very recruitment process.

In spite of all these misgivings and difficulties, sustained attempts have been made globally to facilitate greater participation of women in this field. 'Go to sea' campaign was launched in 2008 by International Maritime Organization (IMO)⁽¹⁷⁾, the United Nations specialised agency overseeing maritime sector, to mount systematic and sustained campaigns to improve seafarer recruitment. One of the important goals of the campaign was to motivate and encourage more women to embrace this challenging occupation. Moreover, in 2012, IMO urged shipping industry to address the requirements for separate accommodation and other facilities for women seafarers and guarantee that a core minimum of two female seafarers are employed on any given ship with effective support systems in place. Following the trend, Indian government

also has initiated several measures like the waiver of tuition fee and age relaxation for admission to girl students in seafaring courses. All these initiatives are not adequate enough to address the challenging requirements of a shortage of seafarers, as the women have to always fight the existing system to prove that they are worth getting employed as seafarers. There is an increasing trend towards the participation of the women in maritime industry from developing countries. Though women seafarers from the west dominated the industry for quite a long time, a change in the trend is observed mostly in the recent years. A recent study indicated that Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC countries) have the highest participation of female senior managers in the maritime industry (26 per cent)⁽¹⁸⁾.

Maritime sector urgently needs a series of concerted efforts to attract more number of women seafarers to address the shortage of sailors as well as to make this sector accessible and sustainable for women. Along with making the working atmosphere in the ship more congenial to women seafarers, serious attention is to be paid to fight the widespread impression that a seafaring is not suitable for women^{(19),(20)}. Maritime education has a very crucial role to play in this respect and it needs to incorporate adequate gender dimension to address the concerns of aspiring women seafarers as well as to quell the impression of this field as a male bastion unsuitable for the fairer sex. Moreover, in a conventional society like India, women seafarers' job requires drastic redefinition of gender roles within the family and in the larger society.

It is obvious that it will take long time to see the seafarers' job, one of the last standing fortress of male domination crumbles and women work shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts in the high seas. However, a concerted effort by a number of players including national and international maritime agencies, a conducive working environment and a supporting family atmosphere will instill a sense of confidence and independence in the young women to embrace such a challenging profession and ultimately will contribute positively towards the economic growth of societies.

Conclusion

It is important to note that there is a need for motivating and enabling women to take up economically productive activities outside home. As indicated in the study conducted by McKinsey Global Institute^[1], there is a challenge before the world to increase the GDP by \$12 trillion by 2025 and it can be attained by giving an equal opportunity to women discarding the notions of gender differences. Despite the growing participation of women in various sectors of the economy, their number appears to be too minuscule in certain challenging industries such as maritime sector. But a sustained effort on the part of national and international agencies is required at this juncture to ensure an increased participation which is likely to meet the gap in the growing demand for seafarers. In India, the women's contribution to national income is as low as 17 per cent and being a country with 60 per cent potentials to improve the GDP with an

equal participation of women, adequate encouragement may be given to women from both the family and the society.

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