the seafarers' charity

Not the woman I was before:

step up, step in by standing up to sexual assault and harassment at sea



November 2026

Authors: Carole Davis and Courtney Newsham

A report for The Seafarers' Charity

Table of Contents

1. Foreword by Deborah Layde 3

2. About the authors 4

3. Acknowledgments 5

4. Executive summary 6

5. Definitions 9

6. Introduction 11

7. Lived experiences of female seafarers and emergent themes 15

8. Discussion 41

9. Recommendations 55

10. Conclusion 59

11. Bibliography 61

12. Helpful Organisations 62

1. Foreword by Deborah Layde, Chief Executive, The Seafarers' Charity

Everyone working at sea has the right to a safe, respectful and inclusive working environment. Sexual harassment and assault have no place in any workplace, and the particular conditions of life at sea make it especially important to listen to and protect female seafarers.

The experiences shared by the women whose voices are represented here make for difficult reading. They paint a picture of how isolation, hierarchy, and a traditionally male-dominated culture can make it exceptionally difficult for individuals to speak up and seek help.

They also make clear why this research is needed. We funded this work to help deepen the maritime sector's understanding of women's lived experiences and, crucially, to ensure those experiences inform practical recommendations for change.

The findings point to circumstances in which inappropriate behaviour can become normalised and perpetrators are not always held to account. This cannot be accepted as an inevitable feature of working at sea. Nor should responsibility for change rest with those who experience harassment. It belongs to all of us: employers, senior leaders, educators, colleagues, regulators and the wider maritime community.

Progress must be measured not by good intentions or policies alone, but by what happens when someone speaks up, when unacceptable behaviour is witnessed, and when leadership is tested. Clear consequences, effective prevention, and meaningful support for survivors must become embedded in everyday maritime practice.

I am particularly struck by the report's emphasis on Allies and Upstanders. Each person on board has an opportunity to influence the culture around them. A colleague who challenges inappropriate behaviour or makes clear that harassment is unacceptable can help change an individual's experience and, over time, change the culture of an entire vessel.

We should also remember that systemic change takes time, while the need for support is immediate. Those who have experienced sexual violence or harassment deserve access to specialist, trauma-informed support right now.

I thank every woman who contributed her experience to this research, and everyone who has worked to bring these voices forward. Their courage should compel us to act.

2. About the authors

Courtney Newsham

Courtney left school at age seventeen to pursue a career in the merchant navy, studying at the Fleetwood Nautical College. Throughout her three-year cadetship she gained experience on cruise ships, a ferry, a buoy tender and an LNG tanker. Courtney qualified as an officer of the watch unlimited in 2020 with a HND in nautical science. She worked on a dredger before settling in the offshore wind sector, working as a mate. The harsh realities she had to face during her time at sea ignited a passion to empower and inspire other women. She hopes her story can touch lives and bring positive change to the maritime industry, creating a safer working environment for all.

Professor Carole Davis

Carole has built up a distinguished and varied career over many years, which has spanned cancer nursing, higher education and training and consulting for the global maritime sector. This has seen her deliver major improvements in teaching and learning in all of these fields. She has received a number of prestigious awards, including Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a National Teaching Fellowship and Senior Fellow at the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA).

Between 2018 and 2020, Carole worked as Head of Academic Development at Warsash School of Maritime Science and Engineering at Solent University.

In 2021, she undertook a secondment as Assistant Director for Modernising Maritime Education at the Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA). In this role, Carole led several initiatives that modernised training strategies across the wider maritime industry. She holds a Professor Emeritus role at Solent University. In 2024, Carole was proud to see the publication of her book Developing Soft Skills in Mariners: A handbook for Facilitators.

Intrinsic to Carole's work is the importance of connecting, collaborating and networking with others in order to create a positive and inclusive working environment.

3. Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the following:

The Seafarers' Charity for providing funding for this report.

Safer Waves, Salute Her UK, CHIRP and UK Women in Fisheries for their time spent talking to us and their ongoing support for the report.

The Warsash Women's Group at Warsash Maritime School Solent University. You are the future.

Finally, and most importantly, the female merchant seafarers who shared their lived experience with such tremendous generosity and dignity.

4. Executive summary

This report gives a voice to those female merchant seafarers who have experienced sexual assault or harassment at sea. It provides an insight into what goes on 'behind closed doors' in a male-dominated working environment.

Aim

We did not want to replicate the work of previous studies, but rather to broaden and deepen discussion of those previously identified themes. Our purpose is to use a discursive approach to leverage change across the Maritime industry along with Fishing and Maritime education. Lastly, it was vital to us that the experiences these women shared informed our recommendations.

Our approach and methods

Anonymised accounts of the lived experience of 12 UK female Merchant Seafarers were used to inform case studies, identify key themes, and shape our recommendations.

Discussion

We found evidence of occasions when collusion, complacency, and a reluctance to hold perpetrators to account has created a toxic and dangerous working environment for female seafarers.

Included are details of charities and external organisations that offer support to seafarers.

In the end, it is actions that count; so, we suggest a set of practices and approaches which, if adopted, will lead to long-term sustained change that improves the working lives of female seafarers at sea. The stories recounting abuse are reframed to illustrate how the proactive actions of Allies and Upstanders can alter the original outcome. Examples are offered of how colleagues can support an individual being abused or harassed and in doing so join in bringing about a positive cultural shift on board.

There are some 'green shoots' of change appearing. However, real systemic change appears slow. Whilst we wait, it is suggested that energy should be expended, and resources should be made available to support the survivors.

Recommendations

We include a series of recommendations that are achievable, acceptable, and sustainable. They offer scope for effective operationalisation by companies, senior leaders, maritime colleges and individuals. Summarised below are the main recommendations grouped within specific themes which arise in the report.

Prevention

- Maritime colleges should promote a safe culture and zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviour – thereby clearly establishing expectations of acceptable behaviour at sea from the start of a seafaring career.
- Instructors, companies, training providers and colleges should know what to do if a recent or historic sex crime is reported.

Safe Reporting

- Support individuals to make a formal complaint by providing information on the different ways to report, as well as outlining what support is available.
- Be clear that there will be consequences for perpetrators. This will include having to leave the vessel. Doing this gives a strong signal that psychological safety is paramount.
- Implement safe avenues for employees to speak up, report and seek help about any negative experiences. This should be beyond their usual line management structure and external to the vessel.

Leadership and Culture

- Those in leadership positions on board should clearly state their expectations of the crew's behaviour on board, including ways of working together and looking after each other. It must be made clear that inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated and should be brought to them immediately.
- Concerns about inappropriate behaviour should be addressed early on, rather than allowing poor behaviour to become normalised and entrenched.

Systemic Change

- Contracts of employment and HR policies should clearly state to all crew members that the company will not tolerate sexual harassment on board. This includes physical advances, inappropriate comments, trolling, exclusion, and gender-based undermining.
- Ensure that cadets are appropriately safeguarded during the 'sea time' stage of their training.
- Make available information to support bystanders, including how to take action as a bystander witnessing sexual harassment. This may include funding delivery of bystander training such as that delivered by Safer Waves. It can also include utilising resources created through the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) allyship campaign 'Safe at Sea .... It takes all of us'. Further information: https://www.iswan.org.uk/our-work/safe-at-sea-campaign/
- Support the Global Maritime Forum's Unspoken project which aims to develop a severity scale and framework for maritime companies to better identify, prevent, and respond to sexual misconduct at sea. https://unspokenproject.org/

Supporting Specialist Help

- Support the development and promotion of Salute Her UK to provide their trauma-informed support services to female victims of sexual violence in the merchant and fishing fleets (as well as to women in the military).
- Support the development and promotion of women-only peer groups and mentoring services. With a focus on cadets supported and mentored by experienced seafarers.

5. Definitions

Allies - someone who helps and supports individuals or a group of people who are treated badly or unfairly.

Bullying – unwanted behaviour from a person or group that makes you feel uncomfortable; frightened; intimidated; offended; insulted; less respected or put down; made fun of; or upset. If the unwanted behaviour involves any of the protected characteristics of age; pregnancy and maternity; disability; gender reassignment or identity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; or sexual orientation, then it is not bullying but is harassment (see below).

Bystanders - someone who sees or knows about sexual harassment or sexual abuse that's happening to someone else. A bystander can be either passive or active. Bystanders have an important choice: they can be either a part of the problem – as a passive bystander – or be part of the solution, by being an active bystander.

Discrimination – in law, being discriminated against is when you're treated unfairly because you have, are perceived to have, or are associated with someone who has any of the protected characteristics of age; pregnancy and maternity; disability; gender reassignment or identity; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; or sexual orientation. It can be against the law for anyone to treat you unfairly because of any of these reasons.

Harassment – is when bullying or other unwanted behaviour involves, or is because of, any of the protected characteristics of age; pregnancy and maternity; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion or belief; sex; or sexual orientation. For it to count as harassment, the unwanted behaviour must have either violated the person's dignity (whether it was intended or not), or have created an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for the person (whether it was intended or not).

Misogyny – a hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women. Misogyny may be distinguished from the closely related word sexism, which signifies discrimination based on sex (although it most frequently refers to discrimination against women) and also carries the meaning "behaviour, conditions, or attitudes that foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex.

Sexual Assault – The term 'sexual assault' is commonly used to refer to any form of sexual violence or abuse that involves physical contact between the perpetrator (person responsible) and the recipient.

Sexual Violence – Includes any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act by violence or coercion, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts directed against a person's sexuality, regardless of relationship to the victim. Considered to be one of the most traumatic, pervasive, and most common human rights violations.

Survivors – In the context of violence and abuse we use this term to describe victims who have overcome the traumatic experiences they have encountered and moved beyond this in their lives. It is not our intention to undermine the impact that sexual assault has on victims.

Upstanders - a person who speaks up or takes action to oppose unjust behaviour or practices instead of remaining quietly passive.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to provide a guide for this report. There need to be continuing discussions with victims, survivors, and both voluntary and statutory organisations to help in the development of a better language to use when describing those who have experienced sexual violence.

6. Introduction

Please note that the views expressed are the authors' own and not necessarily those of The Seafarers' Charity.

Our starting point was the 'lived experience' of female seafarers in relation to sexual harassment and sexual assault. Our approach was to take these experiences to explore familiar themes further and introduce new ones. Our intention is to further develop the arguments raised here in a future book.

It was most important to us that the experiences the women shared informed our specific recommendations. We recognise that in some ways this remains a complex and difficult subject for the maritime industry. However, we maintain that this is no reason not to act. Essential to any meaningful action is to not only have the right people at the table but to change the shape of the table to include survivors.

We acknowledge our report may have limitations. The number of female seafarers is 12, which might be considered a low number. However, we suggest that our intention is not to generalise but to use the experience as a catalyst for wider, and frequently uncomfortable discussions.

We recognise that the survivors of sexual violence and harassment are not restricted to women, but also include male and transgender seafarers. However, we made the decision that exploring these experiences was beyond the scope of this project.

Seafarers are required to move between two different worlds: the world of the sea and the world of the shore. The concept of 'liminality' can be used to explain these two different worlds.

Ships are regarded as liminal spaces because they are places where crews are physically and emotionally removed from the ties and constraints of their homes and families.

Women Seafarers Report 2022 by the Mission to Seafarers

We argue that removal from the "world of the shore" creates particular normative values and behaviours. Some of these are necessary for the safe running of the ship; others can create a culture where the harassment of female seafarers is condoned.

Yet, whilst this might explain some of the reasons for what happens to women seafarers, does it also legitimise it?

Sexual harassment and sexual assault at sea often goes underreported, so accurate statistics which show the extent of the problem are hard to come by.

In response to continued concerns raised by seafarers, the charity Safer Waves recently collaborated with Devon & Cornwall Police and researchers from the University of Winchester *(Waterhouse, Lancaster & Randell 2025)* to better understand the scale and nature of sexual offences at sea. Their report provided important insight into the lived experiences of UK seafarers, the barriers to reporting these incidents, and accountability within the maritime sector.

The survey gathered responses from 276 seafarers from the UK or who worked on UK vessels. Of those surveyed, 80% reported that they had either witnessed or personally experienced at least one sexual offence within the past five years. The most frequently identified incidents were sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination; behaviours that many within the industry have historically minimised or normalised.

Of equal concern were their findings on formal and informal reporting, this included confiding in colleagues and friends, only 62.7% of those who witnessed or experienced an offence chose to report it to anyone (including a colleague on board). Amongst those who did, fewer than one in three were satisfied with the outcome.

Such figures point both to the prevalence of harmful behaviour within the maritime industry but also that there's a significant lack of confidence in current reporting mechanisms.

Research in this area is scant, yet these findings are vital in enabling the industry to understand the extent of the problem. We were particularly interested in the statistics around bystanders including those who in the sample witnessed sexual assault and did nothing about it. This raised a couple of points for us. From a bystander perspective we wondered to what extent those who witnessed a sexual assault without intervening would admit to it. We also suggest that what constitutes a sexual offence is not readily understood.

The findings are corroborated in an earlier *Women Seafarers Report by the Mission to Seafarers* (2022). They found that women regularly experienced sexual harassment from owners and

captains and even guests. Often, the harassment was passed off as playful banter, with it especially prevalent in the superyacht sector. As well as a lack of recognition of the problem and a lack of support for the women who were victims.

Our intention is not to replicate previous studies but to broaden and deepen some existing themes. We draw on lived experiences of female seafarers to engender a discussion that leads to a call to action with tangible recommendations.

We want to give a voice to those female seafarers who have experienced sexual assault, harassment and bullying at sea and provide an insight into what goes on behind 'closed doors' in a male-dominated working environment. Our focus is on the impact these acts and behaviours have not only on the survivor, but how they change the dynamics across the whole vessel; affecting all crew members. This leads to the singling out of individuals, the spreading of rumours and taking sides. It may convey a message to other crew members that they can then 'get away with it' when there are little to no consequences for perpetrators.

Anonymised accounts of 'lived experience' are used to inform case studies, identify key themes and inform recommendations. Such recommendations will be robust and offer scope for effective operationalisation by companies, senior leaders, maritime colleges and individuals. As stated previously, the purpose is simultaneously to encourage discussion and leverage change.

Through first-hand accounts we explore how collusion, complacency and a reluctance to hold individuals to account can create a toxic working environment. Such environments could be perceived to be at odds with any public claims by companies and organisations that they value the safety and wellbeing of seafarers. We argue that changes in the industry must result in measurable and tangible outcomes that make female seafarers feel safe. Such outcomes need cultural shifts, better accountability, and actions that truly support equity for all employees. For us, this is what true authenticity looks like.

We also look at a number of UK-based organisations supporting female seafarers who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. This is not intended to be an exhaustive survey, but rather to provide an overview of those which are better known and to provide an opportunity to consider the range of services and support currently available to women. The authors were interested in the origin stories of these different organisations, services offered, funding models and evaluative frameworks of success. A question we would ask is whether their

existence sometimes lets the maritime industry off the hook i.e. by referring on, does it remove the pressure on others to act? Whilst it is acknowledged that the organisations and agencies in question hold particular expertise, offer specific services and have established processes, it remains an important consideration.

The stories set out in the report that recount abuse are reframed in later sections to illustrate how the interventions of others, for example Allies and Upstanders, could have altered the original outcome. We offer examples of how colleagues can support an individual who is being abused or bullied and, by doing so, bring about a positive cultural shift on board.

In the process of writing this report, we acknowledged the tragic case of Paige Bell, a female seafarer who was murdered, and the stories of sexual assault at sea which emerged into popular culture via reality TV programmes such as Below Deck. However, it was the steady trickle of incidents of sexual harassment, which ground women down and never made it into the public domain, that we wanted to see recorded.

We accept that there's another story within the industry: one where female seafarers report that they did not experience incidents, where companies take swift and appropriate actions against perpetrators. Our intention is to encourage a more nuanced discussion about the responsibilities of others on board and ashore and to challenge complacency.

Both male and female seafarers experience a range of challenges when working at sea, but there are some challenges that are specific to women. Research and first-person accounts reveal that they face challenges that arise from the predominantly male working environment of the shipping industry.

Sexual harassment and bullying are a major concern and require a firm and proactive response. It is a given that all vessels should be safe places for women to work, and any type of sexual harassment or intimidation is unacceptable and should not be tolerated.

In the end, it is actions that count. So, we have proposed a set of practices and approaches which we believe, if adopted, would lead to long-term and sustained change within the maritime industry. These approaches will have an impact on safety at sea, employee retention and above all, stop sexual assault before it happens.

7. The Lived Experiences of Female Seafarers

We spoke to female seafarers who had served on a wide range of vessels. These included tankers, cruise ships, bulk carriers, cargo ships, offshore and subsea construction. The incidents we describe all occurred within the last 6 years.

Life at sea has a certain reputation. Whilst not all female seafarers experience sexual violence, abuse, or harassment, a disproportionate number of them do. When we announced we were writing this report, a number of former seafarers and those working in the maritime industry suggested that our doing so would deter women from going to sea.

This seems a curious response. It implies that it's preferable to ignore these experiences. Instead, we argue that everyone should go to sea secure in the knowledge that the vessels they sail on are safe places.

The idea of joining the Merchant Navy to train to be an Officer filled me with more magic and hope for the future than anything else ever had before.

Female seafarers embarking on their careers describe the challenge of managing expectations when faced with the reality of being at sea:

The pull of the sea is what I battled with throughout the challenging times. I was extremely disappointed to find that the reality did not live up to the marketed version I received. I was not given any insight into the challenges I may face before joining the merchant navy, all I saw was women on marketing campaigns and other various media platforms who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. While it is great women are being represented and there is a good side, the bad side is kept well hidden.

These experiences, all shared in the women's own words, occurred in the last 6 years i.e. between 2019 and 2025. We ask questions about what happened including how the incidents might have been handled differently, not by the women concerned, but by others.

It's a popular view that if you focus on developing a "certain mindset" and become resilient, then none of this will affect you.

"You must do the crap stuff, the boring stuff, the stuff that no one wants to do, but if you sacrifice enough, work hard and show resilience, you'll always find your way into that room you dream of being in."

Is this a helpful way of looking at the world? Indeed, is it true; should we really be encouraging exploitation, putting up with mistreatment and abuse? Resilience is a problematic word. There's an implication that you just need to toughen up and not appear weak, even in the direst circumstances.

It suggests that having the 'right kind' of mindset enables one to overcome gender, age, experience, and power dynamics. Such rhetoric is a dangerous thing, implying a straight line between goal and outcome.

Surely, it is reasonable to take the view that 'stretch' and an environment that tests our capabilities and where we learn new things is deeply satisfying. It's a given that you'll be taken out of your comfort zone, though you still need to be supported and feel safe.

Is it a good idea to push a narrative that juxtaposes the reality of working at sea with an empowering message that women can achieve whatever they set out to do, against all odds, and risking extreme mistreatment?

We argue that the maritime industry will be better served by recognising the problem and committing to eliminating it. One of the best ways of doing this is by paying attention to the voices of the women and their lived experiences:

The first day on board a ship is always the most nerve-racking. It's like settling into a new home but with strangers. These strangers have travelled from all over the world. They have their own culture, language, religion, and education. A set of morals and principles defined by their own personal circumstances. It's a social experiment: how dozens of humans, so unique to each other, live and work together for months on end. Fascinating. We call them our Crew members, but a more suitable term would be our housemates. Ships are often described as floating hotels. The difference between a hotel and a ship is that when you go to a hotel, you aren't working with the other guests. You don't have to spend most of the day with them. You don't have to put up with them if they are aggravating, and you are free to leave whenever you wish.

Even if you arrive in an environment where normative practices are long established but are not in your best interests, then the expectation is that you should just accept them. Yet you can't easily leave or remove yourself from the orbit of others.

A view persists about the legitimacy of the role of women at sea which challenges their

legitimacy and the right to work at sea:

"Why? That is your only job as a woman: to have children and take care of the household. That is what every other woman I know does, including my wife."

This can also be expressed in ways that undermine female seafarers:

From the moment I stepped onto the gangway with my bag for my first trip as an 18-year-old I experienced sexism. An AB rushed over and took my bag because I was a girl and said I shouldn't lift heavy things. I experienced this a lot during my time at sea always having people question if I can do something or just telling me I can't because I'm a girl.

The inference is that despite being accepted by the company for deck cadet training, females are not considered capable of doing the job.

For my second trip as a cadet, I got the chance to work in Angola and as scary as this was, I was so excited for the opportunity. During this trip there was one particular AB that was 'obsessed' with me. He first started taking over my jobs and pushing me out of the way saying I cannot do that because I am a girl and girls shouldn't do a 'man's' job. I laughed about this at first and didn't give my opinion, but it carried on almost every day. He would take power tools off me sometimes by saying 'give it' other times without saying a thing, he pushed me multiple times and questioned everything I was doing while stopping his own job to 'oversee' if I did something correctly. Most of these jobs were LSA/FFE tasks delegated from the bridge. There was another female cadet with me on this ship, and he was doing the same thing to her, and she started to get really upset about it all so I spoke to the Chief Officer about it, and he said he would talk to him about it. It stopped for a couple of days and then he started again.

Reporting sexual harassment and sexual assault

As we see from the lived experiences of women, reporting sexual harassment and sexual assault was not always straightforward. Responses range from informal reporting to filing a formal and official complaint with partial reporting e.g., not reporting all incidents or all perpetrators.

I reported the Staff Captain formally. I did not report the Chief Officer due to fear of retaliation and lack of trust in senior management.

Then in a separate situation involving a different female seafarer we learn about the indifference reporting met with:

I put up with these behaviours until near the end of my contract, but before I left, it didn't feel morally right to leave without at least trying to put an end to them, as I worried about other cadets who might be working under him. I wrote everything down on a notepad and apprehensively approached the chief officer. I explained everything I had written, emphasising how much it had affected me at work and how concerned I was for other cadets who may find themselves in my shoes. When I looked up from my notepad to gauge the Chief's reaction to what I was saying, he just stared at the clock on his office wall and yawned simply muttering 'I'll have a word.'

Reporting incidents had to be weighed up alongside the agonising consequences for self and career if they did so and whether non-reporting was instead preferable. So, it may be preferable to confide in a trusted colleague and be encouraged to make a formal report.

I told a friend who I had sailed with and studied at college with. She recommended reporting it.

"Speaking truth to power" can be risky. It can lead to negative consequences for one's career at sea, perhaps resulting in being labelled a troublemaker. Nonetheless, there were clear examples when speaking up became a catalyst for change.

I did take action after telling a 3rd Engineer I sailed with, and the company took swift, decisive, protective action and provided unending support.

Yet, the reality is that when sexual assault and harassment are reported, outcomes are inconsistent.

The other female cadet and I reported him to the company … apparently, we were not the first. They reassured us that he would not be placed on a vessel with female cadets again. Yet, he was on board the same vessel about six weeks later with a 17-year-old female cadet. We were disgusted.

So, you may learn that if you speak truth to power, then power doesn't like the sound, and you then face the consequences. The fear of being 'singled out' prevents you from speaking out. Or when you do speak out the perpetrator is moved off a vessel but there are still no real consequences:

From what I've heard from other people the engineer still works in the company, or he did at least in 2024. When I mentioned my experiences to the new cadet manager at the end of 2024, he was shocked and so apologetic for what had happened, and he vowed to make it better for me, I'm not sure how exactly but I hope it does get better.

It was common for consequences for the perpetrator to be light:

During my cadetship, I faced repeated sexual harassment from different senior officers. One Staff Captain regularly touched me inappropriately despite me telling him to stop. Eventually, I reported him. The company's response was to give him the option to resign or be fired. He resigned and quickly found another job possibly better than before. I on the other hand, was left behind to face backlash from colleagues who defended him or dismissed my experience.

A lack of trust in reporting harassment was common.

Later, a Chief Officer repeatedly harassed me too. He would bite my arm during work, try to kiss me, and make explicit comments such as saying he wanted to have sex with me. Reporting him felt impossible, as he was close with the captain and other senior officers, and I felt they would protect him over me. Afterwards, I was even mocked about reporting an officer. One joked that I could "report him too if I wanted," as though my speaking up was a game.

There's an assumption that once a report is made and the perpetrator is held to account, that gives closure to those affected:

Such experiences can have a long-lasting negative impact, leading to a lack of confidence, lack of trust and plummeting self-esteem, whereas before the opposite may have been true. Traumatic situations have a long-lasting impact on who we are as people.

One female cadet reported that whilst she did not report the incident to colleagues on board, they did summon the courage to inform the cadet manager who was designated as a shore-based support for their sponsoring company.

I spoke to my cadet manager in the office a few days later and she'd said she would sort it and send out a company-wide bulletin about harassment and abuse and blah blah blah, nothing was done, nothing was sent out. She left the company not long after that and only recently someone had gone through the old emails and found the complaints and apparently, they're investigating it

but I'm not sure what happened with it. A lot of people in the company know what happened and have said if anything like that ever happened again, I could call any of them for help which meant a lot.

Whilst it is reassuring that later others in the sponsoring company offered support, it is concerning that the original complaint was not investigated, which would appear to be a dereliction of care to their sponsored cadet. It suggests that even those outside this realm of liminality on board fail to take appropriate action and seemingly do not understand the dangers associated with these incidents.

Is it a question of 'out of sight out of mind'? And what does this signal to the female seafarer when every single person with the power and responsibility to act fails to do so? In this incident, we have a young female cadet left in an extremely vulnerable position. Not only are they left isolated, but they also see no point in reporting in the future. Cadets are amongst the most vulnerable on board during their 'sea time' training period. For many young people, it may be their first time away from home. However, there appears to be a lack of clarity in relation to responsibility for their safeguarding.

It starts with college

Finding oneself in a gendered minority starts at college. Again and again, we return to a theme that circles back to appearances and what being feminine looks like.

Several women we spoke to recalled how they experienced name calling and sexual insults intended to cause embarrassment and shame. Such comments when challenged were dismissed by others as banter.

As a cadet, your first day begins in the classroom if there is mistreatment there, it gives the impression to others that it is okay to behave like that at sea.

It suggests either a reluctance or lack of knowledge amongst educators of the need to create a safe and inclusive classroom. So, does the learning environment at college pave the way for some of the toxicity at sea? This is not to say that this was the case for all college experiences, however, it did seem a relatively common experience amongst the women we spoke to.

Female solidarity and support

This was an enduring theme, with examples of positive older female role models having a profound influence on developing thinking about what was acceptable and in boundary setting:

P assured me that anybody who minimises or justifies harassment of any kind is a danger to *society. P empowered me to report harassment at the first instance and demand action. P told me that if any male colleague has a problem with us being there, then that's, in her words, "Their problem. Not ours."*

Such encounters with other women led to a realisation that sexual harassment is never right. It shifts responsibility to the perpetrator and away from the victim/survivor.

This is why I really feel P had a huge impact on me. Because she was a breath of fresh air in this toxic environment, ripping all of the justification from others apart. This is why upstanders who validate this position are so important.

Such encounters, albeit brief, have a significant impact:

My opinion of womanhood has evolved over the years of working at sea, not only through my friendship with P but also through many other women I've had the privilege of connecting with. There is nothing more powerful than like-minded women, swimming together against the tide.

Early experiences of intimidation

Within ten hours of arriving on the first sea phase of their cadetship, this 18-year-old recalls receiving a phone call in their cabin.

In their own words:

Deep, heavy breaths accelerated through the phone.

I said with apprehension in my voice, "Hello? Who is it?"

A throaty voice replied, "What are you doing right now?"

Unsure of how to answer that question, I paused; the drawn-out exhales continued.

"Your voice is making me horny."

This would not be the last time:

I had these sorts of phone calls often throughout my time on board ships. Heard from other women that I wasn't alone, however, it was difficult to get to the bottom of, because on some of the built-in telephone systems, you can't see who is calling. It is often laughed off and made out to not be important. Women become hardened to it after a while. Very sad.

Sexual harassment

A further incident also occurred on the first day of arriving on the vessel, involving a crew member they had been assigned to work with.

I was sat in the smoking room. S came and decided to sit on the seat immediately next to mine when there are dozens to choose from. He told me that he would need to go into the cabin later to clean my shower head laughingly saying I know what 'you whores get up to with shower heads.' He then leaned in and whispered, 'You better lock your knickers away, or I'll smell them.' I knew this was just the beginning. I must report it because I will need support if things go sour. Besides, I didn't trust this man. I've never met him before in my life. What if he does use his master key and goes into my cabin when I'm not there?

When they repeated these disturbing and misogynistic comments to the captain shortly afterwards, they were met with impatience and indifference.

He told me 'this is just one of those things you know my crew have various backgrounds, morals and behaviours, you have to adapt to that' going on to tell me that if I wanted to come back as an officer on board his vessel, he expected me to deal with these issues alone.

Having had their concerns dismissed by the Captain, they found going down the ranks the same indifference and worse:

I explained the situation to the Chief Mate, raising my concerns about S having a master key and I asked him if he wouldn't mind keeping an eye on my Cabin while I'm not there. He roared with laughter and simply ushered me up onto the bridge to sign some papers.

Escalation

With the previous account, we noted how sexual harassment starts with not respecting personal space, followed by innuendo, followed by a blatant threat to break into a young woman's private cabin and perform a lewd act. All within a 12-hour period of arriving on board.

So here we have the most senior rank on board colluding and normalising threatening and criminal behaviour. When they refer to "… this is one of those things …." They are dismissing and making light of something serious. They blatantly support and validate unacceptable behaviour. Add to this gaslighting and neglecting a duty of care to the individual, the company, and the college.

We have the female seafarer reaching out to a potential ally who also refuses to take their well-founded concerns seriously and reduces their dilemma to an amusing anecdote.

Unfortunately, we discovered many instances of senior crew members not taking seriously complaints of serious sexual threat and intimidation, and worst of all not recognising them as such.

Women at sea have proven themselves to be more than capable and opportunities exist for them throughout the industry. However, this will be compromised whilst the views and behaviour of these male seafarers continue unchecked and without consequences.

The issue of consent also arose:

I got on well with all crew and had a trusted friend in M. He and I signed off together, along with some other crew. We all had a drink together at the hotel before our flights the next day. He decided to offer to walk me back to my room as he normally did on ship with nothing strange occurring. However, this time, he forced his way into my room and sexually assaulted me. I couldn't physically overpower him. Genuinely such a harrowing experience, and I suspect this happened on the one night we were not on board together as I was the most senior in rank present, and no other officer was there to report it or intervene. I did end up reporting it and he was sacked, along with the other crew present. I carry a lot of guilt about them all losing their jobs.

Blurring of professional boundaries

The following incident illustrates the normalisation of inappropriate and intimate questions being asked of female seafarers in a working environment.
During my first sea phase, I discovered how quickly an innocent conversation can turn into a derogatory one. I was working on the deck with one of my crew members who was supposed to be supervising my training. Suddenly, he asked me if I was a virgin. I looked twice, and spluttered "Yes, no, I don't know." He chuckled, "You don't know?"

I shrugged, in the hope that playing dumb would make him divert the conversation.

"Are you saving yourself for marriage? Or are you looking for an experienced man," he thrusts the air.

I turn my head away and place my hand in front of it, "It's not something I want to discuss." Cringing at the mere thought of it.

"Why? Are you shy? Everyone talks like that here." He smirks, arching over to continue his work from where he left off.

Not only is there a complete erosion of professional boundaries, but the women are made to feel that their response is both unreasonable and at odds with the culture on board. The 'everyone talks like this here' is a standard response used to justify it, and when you object, you are at odds with the norm. The colleague in question does not care how uncomfortable these deeply personal questions make women feel nor the levels of anxiety it creates. It is completely dehumanising.

So, we have this tension between a member of crew assigned to train you and sign off your competencies versus a clear abuse of position. Where is their duty of care? It appears to be non-existent. How do colleges and companies introduce checks and balances to ensure a safe learning environment? This is where safeguarding and a code of conduct established by companies and training colleges for on board trainers and mentors should not just exist but be followed with punitive consequences for those who don't adhere to it.
The clear embarrassment shown by them is no deterrent and the crew member simply persists:

At that age, I wasn't clued up on sexual harassment. I thought this guy was just a little strange, and once he realises, I'm not interested, he will leave me alone. But I was very mistaken. That was only the beginning. He asked more questions of the same nature,
"What cup size are you?" "What colour knickers are you wearing?" "Do you shave your vagina?" It would always be asked on the spot, without warning. Since evenings were taken up by the racing, worrisome thoughts about where this may lead. I had conjured up some responses to hit back at him, in the hope he would get the message, but he never did.

Normalisation of unacceptable behaviour

Regardless of no encouragement the harassment escalates further into what comes under the definition of 'stalking.' As was common amongst the women we spoke to the perpetrator was senior in rank and, in this instance, was responsible for signing off their training record. Often, they blamed themselves for unknowingly encouraging these behaviours.

This evolved into him constantly calling my cabin and pressuring me to meet him outside work hours. I felt torn on what to do. This guy is supposed to be training me. I wondered if I had given the impression that it was okay to act like that. I listened to some beliefs and attitudes from other crew members that assured me 'boys will be boys' and that 'we are coming into a man's world and need to accept that this is just the way it is.'

This was a common scenario where the women concerned are made to feel like their objections are unreasonable and they are being a prude. It illustrates how the atmosphere becomes tense and intimidating because the threat of assault is always there.

In terms of escalation, are we to extrapolate from these accounts that it is 'ok to bully, brutally harass, sexually assault and rape with impunity?' This is a theme worth unpacking.

Negative consequences and reactions to female seafarers reporting sexual harassment and abuse

We were interested in how some male crew members reacted:

I found in group discussions about a recent dismissal or warning given to a perpetrator that many men do not like it when other men are given consequences for their actions. Then, the cycle of women being generalised as 'threats' continues rather than showing concern for the treatment they originally received.

Thus, there appears to be the justification of appalling behaviour with individuals at all ranks not taking responsibility. This happens when there are no consequences, only acceptance and collusion.

Here a female seafarer reflects on her decision to remain silent:

The company would have fired them for sure, but deep sea it's not like they can get off in the near future so would have made the whole boat awkward for everyone. People were already nervous having me on board because they thought I had the potential to falsely report so spent a long time gaining their trust to be friends with me, I felt if I made an official report every ship would only see me as a girl who cried sexual assault and I'd never have had a close relationship on board with crew again.

Clothing and appearance

Appearance, including clothing and perceptions of femininity, was a recurring theme. It should be a given that correctly fitting work clothes should be informed by safety and ergonomics however, first-hand accounts and previous research (Sampson & Acejo 2023) suggest that ill-fitting and oversized PPE for women is a common experience. It is often the habitual, seemingly small humiliations which not only compromise safety but erode dignity and self-worth.

First vessel was my sponsoring company's vessel: C/O made advances towards the other female cadet and I, asked invasive questions and gave us clothing that was too small, admitting that this was intentional to the male cadet.

A further example of sexual harassment centres around male responses to women's bodies:

*Often, when a woman at sea takes pride in their appearance, it is seen as if we are trying to get attention. One woman told me that when she wore red lipstick another crew member said "That lipstick would look better around my c***" I avoided wearing much makeup, but I had to wear concealer to cover my spots because they would be pointed out if I didn't. On some ships I wore a jacket over my uniform, even in scorching weather, because the stares, smirks, and remarks over the way my body looked were exhausting and I felt uncomfortable wearing any form of fitted clothing.*

There are tensions amongst male crew with regard to the different reactions crew members have to female bodies. These can oscillate from fascination and lust to disgust and discomfort.

A woman's biology shouldn't be a taboo subject on board, but I have seen the way some of the crew I have previously sailed with over the years react when they hear about anything to do with a period.

Commenting on parts of the female anatomy was not just in response to online pictures:

The same day while walking up the stairs he made sure that he was behind me and made comments about my bum, pointing it out, saying 'ooo look at your bum' and asking, 'why I would let him walk behind me like that.' This made me feel extremely uncomfortable.

Extremely intrusive and offensive comments together with an extreme lack of propriety were commonplace:

A few days later while on a coffee break one of the crane operators asked if he could add me on Facebook so he could see my progress as my cadetship goes on. Because he asked me himself instead of just finding me, I said yes. X was sat with the crane operator asking him to look through my pictures. I wasn't bothered because my last few pictures had been from on board and didn't think they would go so far back to late August. At this point, The AB had taken the phone and was on a picture of myself, my mum and sister. I then heard him make comments about my sister saying 'wow look at the boobs on her' and asking, 'if my mum was single' and that he would 'love to be my stepdad' and imagine me calling him 'daddy.' This made me again feel very uncomfortable as this was now about my family and not me, so I got defensive trying to protect myself and my family and he just laughed at that. He also came across pictures of my best friend saying he wants her 'to be his girlfriend,' calling her 'baby' and asking, 'if I can give him her number.' At this point I just laughed along and tried to change the situation but the more he spoke about it the more uncomfortable I felt and started avoiding coffee breaks.

Often the men in question did not attempt to conceal their culpability. Their harassment was often premeditated with the perpetrator showing no discernible embarrassment:

After leaving the FRC he was informing the bridge we had finished but his radio died. My radio is inside my back pocket, and the microphone is hooked onto the front pocket of my bib and braces. I

took the microphone off and extended the line, so it was fully away from me and passed it to him. When he was finished, he tried to place it back on my front pocket and at the same time grabbed my boobs. At the same time he tried to turn my radio up from the actual radio saying it was too quiet but there was no intention to turn my radio up just to grab my bum. I quickly moved away and very directly said 'don't fucking touch me.' Again, he had the same smirk on his face.

Rumour and speculation

Happens all too often. I've had it before where they were liking my Facebook profile picture before I had even stepped on board.

Whilst this might be described as friendly, innocent fun it often became something more intrusive with reports from the women of stalking on social media or with such behaviour passed off as banter:

As soon as the crew caught wind that a woman was coming on board, they stalked her social media. They passed a photo of her around, nodding in approval and smirking. One crew member said, 'You've got the pretty face, and she's got the nice body.' Another crew member said, 'So when do we get to bang her then?' I couldn't have produced a more disgusted look. He scoffed, "We're only joking." But some jokes just aren't funny.

Workplace gossip is commonplace, however when salacious and malicious it becomes harmful towards women. Crew build narratives, often false and fantasy based, about the women on board. A female seafarer recounts a conversation with a male crew member who told her:

it's like we have our own tabloid on board. I've heard more about you in two weeks than I've heard about any celebrity in my lifetime.

Gossip and rumour appear to follow women. This was a form of bullying which created reputational risk and damaged the credibility of the female seafarers concerned.

Being subjected to this whilst being unable to control your own narrative was uncomfortable:

Being a woman, as a minority, I saw first-hand how much men love to fantasise, make up stories to suit their own agenda. Many found it exciting to see a woman on board, but not for good reasons

Often, professional standards of behaviour whilst at work were not encouraged. This made it easy for conversations to get out of hand.

Also, another gripe which really infuriates me is the way men talk about women as a whole. Some will gloat about a sex worker and get fist bumps for, in their words, 'pulling a woman' on a night out, but label women as 'slags' and 'whores' for rumours that emerge. While working in male settings, they wolf whistle and comment on women who may be passing by on the dock. A woman's legs, chest area etc.

Justification by women themselves

We learnt previously that women would play down experiences and make excuses. This proved to be an effective survival strategy for a lengthy sea voyage. Minimising the behaviour and giving the benefit of the doubt were ways of coping.

Cadets don't get to choose who trains them; you get what you're given, and you should be grateful for that. Besides, it's not that bad; I'm probably overreacting. He might've just been playing around with me; maybe that's just the way he is. I'm sure he doesn't mean to scare me like that.

So, the reflections above encapsulate the bind cadets find themselves in. Cadets are there on sufferance and goodwill with any challenge to the status quo possibly being career ending.

The following response suggests that the colleges may be responsible for not instilling in cadets what their rights are and not ensuring they have a positive learning experience during their sea time:

The colleges have a lot to answer for. Also, how in the moment we doubt our own sense of what is acceptable. So, we know deep down it is not right, yet we find excuses for the perpetrator as the fact it is premeditated and deliberate is unbearable.

Male allies

We found the concept of male allies could be fluid i.e. whilst they may not necessarily be prepared to speak out in an 'upstander' role, they were defined as kind individuals who treated women as equals.

I find personally male upstanders are rare, but ones that are kind and treat women equally do exist.

It is somewhat alarming that the bar becomes so low for decency that 'kindness' and 'equality' are deemed the gold standard rather than a basic human requirement.

So, when faced with the worst behaviour women start feeling grateful to those who are not quite so blatant yet still behaving badly and crossing boundaries.

I definitely became more 'accepting' of others' mistreatment because it wasn't as bad and also very hard to fight all battles at once.

There were examples of male colleagues upon learning of sexual harassment from other crew members suggesting a particular strategy for managing the situation which puts the onus back on the woman who is on the receiving end:

Anyway, you're a big girl. You can handle it.

There was a tendency amongst those we spoke to of a dominant point of view that equates 'putting up with it' or 'sorting it out yourself' as a sign of your character and suitability for a career at sea. It also assumes that the imbalance of power, rank, experience, and physical strength does not exist.

I have heard many people in general respond with this when confiding about mistreatment.

Survival strategies

Acceptance and choosing a quiet life proved a way of surviving for many women. Fighting back and challenging takes effort and could often be at great personal cost.

Challenging the behaviour myself was frowned upon, as if I'd done something wrong, as if I was some threat to the system. I ended up brushing the harassment off as isolated incidents or telling myself, 'It's just part of the job.' I became accustomed to the discomfort, slowly adjusting my expectations and accepting behaviours that should have raised red flags.

Exhaustion of working alongside a sexual predator

In many of the incidents we describe, it is the persistency of the sexual harassment, regardless of the firm refusal and the perpetrator's unwillingness to stop, which is so shocking. Eventually, it ends in breaking and entering followed by a sexual assault:

At Christmas, I had an electrician (who had a pregnant wife) harass me. It started with an inappropriate anonymous gift in my stocking and escalated into him breaking into my cabin while I was on watch to decorate it with Christmas stuff and hide items in my personal stuff as some form of Christmas game (all sent anonymously although I knew who it was). They hid condoms in my underwear drawer for example, and the game was I had to find all of the items and report back for a "present." The following day I found a wrapped gift of air pods, women's underwear (the correct size so clearly been looking at mine) and expensive perfume in my bed under the sheets and a handwritten card saying he can't wait to make me his snow angel. I delivered the gifts back to his cabin and told him to stop breaking into and leave me alone or I'd write a complaint. The next day I was in bed and caught him red-handed breaking into my cabin pretending he was there to fix a light. When I tried to kick him out, he attempted to get in my bed and touch my breasts. I tried to push him out my door, and he pinned me against my wardrobe by my neck and tried to kiss me when I hit him in the face and told him to leave.

Many of the women spoke of the toll on their mental health by having to work alongside a predator.

Hypervigilance is exhausting. I could never relax around him, and whenever we had to work alone together, I had to analyse his every move.

Also, how reporting can be overwhelming:

A 2nd Officer I had never even met was overheard calling me a "troublemaker." These comments made me feel like the problem, even though I wasn't the one causing harm. The hardest part wasn't only the harassment itself, but the aftermath, the emotional exhaustion, the backlash, and the way reporting felt more damaging to my career than the actions of the perpetrators. I often feel torn. I don't want to be seen as the girl who reports everyone, yet standards must be met. Silence protects no one but speaking up has taken a huge toll on me personally and professionally.

This is an especially powerful quote; it shows the extreme emotional labour expended on a

daily basis.

The impact on mental health

Underlying the lived experiences of the women were themes of loneliness and feeling trapped, with there being literally no escape when at sea where voyages last weeks and months.

I realised nothing was going to fix the feelings of disgust and shame.

These reactions had to be managed when facing the perpetrator on a daily basis.

Here we have an example of the appalling and criminal behaviour of a much older man in a position of power following a violent sexual assault:

I have always been resilient, but I wish I hadn't been put in situations where I had to use every last drop of it to survive in the career I had chosen.

In exploring the language surrounding women at sea, it was striking how frequently the term 'resilience' was used in a positive sense. However, it can sometimes blur the boundaries between right and wrong:

I have heard from other women that they are 'tired of being told to be resilient all the time.' This often excuses people's behaviour and puts the focus on the survivor's response as opposed to the perpetrator's actions. I feel that when terms like "Don't give up." "Keep pushing on." "Keep your head up." etc. are used, it's like putting a plaster on a deep wound.

Aftermath

The suppression of traumatic events, both singular and recurrent, can be a short-term survival strategy when on board. However, when back on shore women were likely to recognise the impact:

It was only when the present dangers had dissipated that I really came to terms with how much the last three months on board affected me. It's like the boiling water concept – the idea that if a frog is placed in water that is ever so slowly heated, it won't notice the temperature change until it's too late. This metaphor resonated with me on multiple occasions, especially in helping me understand

how I had slowly become accustomed to the discomfort and challenges around me.

Women reported themselves as changed irrevocably:

I was paranoid when I went out with my friends, always looking over my shoulder and feeling overly suspicious of the people around me. There was a persistent sinking feeling in my gut, and I'd drink more to numb it.

Post-traumatic stress symptoms revealed themselves:

I'd wake up in a pool of sweat from a nightmare, convinced I'm back on board that ship, frantically searching for the light; the sight of my bedroom at home would give me an instant hit of solace.

The consequences of complaining on one's career

I could've told my training company, I'm sure they would've arranged a swift disembarkation at the next suitable port, which is few and far between. We are usually sailing for weeks on end before we arrive at a port, and there's no guarantee we can sign off there. I waited a long time to join this vessel, and my training provider made it clear it was all they had to offer me at the time. I don't want to miss the next intake for my exams; I don't want to put off qualifying any longer. I've worked tirelessly for this.

So, there are consequences for your career and training if you report the abuse. It leaves you between a rock and a hard place, and the complainant becomes the problem:

The captain told me that if I wished to file a complaint that an investigation will take place.

If S was found guilty, they will have to leave this vessel at the next port however, I was told I would have to leave too. He said this was company policy and he was merely the messenger. It made me wish I had kept my mouth shut. I told the captain that I will not leave this vessel due to somebody else's misconduct and would stay on principle.

Another consideration is a desire not to cause trouble for others:

It is sometimes frowned upon by training companies because they then have what can be a challenge of finding a new ship appointment for a cadet. Even though I know this isn't my problem,

I didn't want to create more problems for people.

This exchange follows an incident of sexual assault where the complaint describes the behaviour of someone who followed them to their cabin.

Crucially, it is showing how perpetrator and victim are treated the same if the victim is a cadet. A move off a vessel can mean an interruption to training if another suitable vessel cannot be easily found. Staying and not feeling safe can be seen to be the preferred alternative.

Expectations about how victims should behave

"He said once the chief had left, that he thinks you're lying because why would you report it, and then not file a formal complaint."

This is a common experience for women who were raped. They face a judgement made of how women should behave and act regardless of circumstances. There is a lack of understanding about what's involved in making a formal complaint and the consequences for the women making the complaint.

Others thought I was lying because I had been to the recreation room a few times while he was there. Obviously, they had no idea of the situation and quite frankly it was dangerous to make assumptions. I was feeling extremely lonely and depressed, and I went to the recreation room for company. Good or bad company didn't matter at the time; it was an escape from my own thoughts. Besides, S was extremely quiet in group settings, I knew he wouldn't be an issue. But this is why survivors are afraid they won't be believed.

This is the myth that women invited or welcomed unwarranted sexual attention, and therefore they should not complain and nor should they be believed. There is an assumption that women should play a role/behave in a way that makes them more likely to be believed or be a credible witness.

Allyship amongst senior ranks

There were examples of how those in leadership positions proved effective and trustworthy from the start:

A new captain came on board and told me he had heard about what was going on and told me in no uncertain terms to tell him straight away so it can be nipped in the bud before it escalates.
This exchange, whilst brief, established the captain as someone who takes sexual harassment seriously, wants to be told about it when it occurs, and will act. Such behaviour should be replicated by all of the senior staff on board establishing boundaries as well as the difference between right and wrong.

Women looking out for women

There were reports of how women seafarers looked out for each other by issuing warnings about sexual predators:
I felt obliged to warn her about some of the crew, especially Y.

Whilst this is a notable example of female solidarity, yet it can be argued whether this responsibility should fall exclusively to the women. Should not male crew members speak out and put pressure on abusers to modify their unacceptable behaviour?

We also came across examples of acceptance and mutual respect amongst women seafarers, and of different decisions taken when faced with similar consequences on board. There is no judgement in the following account:

R thought I was so brave for staying on board and finishing my contract. But I thought she was the brave one, for having the courage to disclose what had been going on to her training company while still being confined to a vessel and walking away from something she knew was no good for her well-being.

What conditions facilitate healing for survivors?

A ship is no place to deal with traumatising situations. I needed the proper support to do that.

It is important to hear from survivors about what they need to heal. Reporting sexual harassment and abuse was not the endpoint. Post-traumatic stress was common amongst female seafarers, and they recognised that this was essential to recovery:

Being in a familiar comforting environment where no dangers are imposing. Surrounded by the people that love me and have my best interests at heart. Being able to take a walk in nature, have time off to rest and fill my battery, partake in hobbies and activities that fulfil me. Confide in people

who understand, even though I didn't know who at the time. I wasn't aware of Safer Waves.

Victim blaming

We saw how women were held to different standards:

The other female seafarer and I were called into see the captain. He said that it had come to his attention that we had both been in the recreation room the previous evening doing karaoke. He told us that cannot happen anymore and that we don't need another sexual harassment case on our hands.

There was also soul searching and a degree of guilt.
However, I also wonder how I couldn't see this coming. I wouldn't class myself as being attractive and thought I would be able to pick up if something would happen, but I guess not.

Again, the message was that they should restrict their recreational activities on board in case this was weaponised as female sexual harassment by male crew members. Such an attitude is problematic and sends a message to everyone on board that the only one who might face consequences is the survivor.

I knew from the first moment I reported S's derogatory comment that the captain didn't care about my well-being. And unfortunately, he perceives the women on board as the problem.

Kind Leadership

After Z left, a new captain joined. I noticed his warm and friendly smile straight away. He showed interest in my training and asked for feedback on how I had found the last few months on board. He assured me that it is not how he and the current chief officer operate; my concerns will be handled differently.

This account of a people-centred leader is in stark contrast to previous ones even though this is what should be the norm.

I was in awe of how the Chief presented himself to the crew. He didn't have 'favourites.' And he couldn't be influenced or swayed by other people's opinions. He made an impression on his crew. He was a true leader; his commands were fair and honest. He allowed everyone to voice their thoughts and concerns; he took all feedback on board. The chief often held training sessions for the

crew in his own free time because he wanted us all to be held to the same standard.

The people mattered more to the chief officer than his job. He wouldn't turn a blind eye to misconduct; he called people out on it professionally. The chief was a big believer in teamwork making the dream work; he encouraged us to look out for each other on board. He recognised and appreciated a good job but spotted slips right away and addressed them.

A common theme which recurred was a coterie of allies who having experienced mistreatment and bullying as a cadet themselves drew on those experiences to ensure cadets under their command were treated with empathy and compassion. As a consequence, individuals were encouraged to strive and reach their full potential. Such an approach also becomes part of the healing:

I felt empowered to work on myself since he came on board. Every single day, he mentored me. He had me up on the bridge early in the morning to evaluate me on the subjects he had told me to study the week prior. He was looking for confident and concise answers. If I showed one flicker of doubt or nerves, he'd ask me to try again. He drew extensive diagrams on the whiteboard to help me understand the more technical topics. The chief gave me opportunities to take the lead in operations, including anchoring, mooring, and drills. My confidence had dwindled, and I was nervous to take charge, but he believed I was capable, and I suppose at the time that felt like a lifeline.

In the aftermath of traumatic experiences such an approach becomes part of the healing:

S kept out of my way for good, but I didn't need to worry so much about that anymore. I knew the Chief would deal with it promptly and professionally. I didn't need to steer clear of the recreation room anymore; the chief encouraged me to have fun. The dynamics between the crew changed; on Christmas Day, all of us, including the Captain, gathered for a celebration. Every single person was respectful; I never felt uncomfortable or like an outcast. I felt belonging and acceptance.

I could go to work every day, free from sexism and harassment. Feeling supported by the team around me, and I'd even go as far as to say I felt cared for by them too. We would discuss meaningful topics, such as our families and how much we can't wait to see them again. If one of us were feeling down, the rest of the crew would try to cheer them up. This vessel had transformed into a kinder environment for all.

It takes a village

Clearly, who is in charge and the values they hold hugely influence the female seafarer's experience and outcomes when reporting harassment:

I grieve what my time on board this vessel could have been and how much suffering could have been avoided. I wondered whether the harassment would have escalated if the relieving chief and captain had been on board from the beginning. I believe they would've taken my initial complaint seriously. Furthermore, I feel as though I would've felt safe enough to speak out from the beginning. The relieving chief never gave me any reason to believe he wouldn't have taken my concerns seriously; he seemed very determined to stamp it out before it escalated. The captain seemed pleased to see a woman on board; he never made me feel ashamed for being there or feeling like I was just another issue he had to deal with. I wonder if the Bosun would have been so brave as to treat me like that while the relieving chief and captain were running the ship. Even after the chief made it clear to all crew in one of his meetings that harassment of any kind wouldn't be tolerated. I don't think so. I grieve the amount I could've progressed in that period, both academically and personally. Ultimately, I grieve the woman I was before.

Here, the role of the captain was crucial to the extent to which sexual harassment and sexual assault was taken seriously but putting the onus on a single individual in a senior leadership role wasn't enough.

I do think that a decent captain massively helps and sets/implements the standards, but yes these issues are deeply ingrained into some crews, and it saddens me to write that I think it won't always solve everything. Also, there is nowhere near enough training or information given to Captains on how to manage harassment. They are taught a step-by-step on how to manage a complaint however these issues are complex and deeply sensitive.

As one woman argued:

Independent reporting mechanisms are vital. Companies need to create safe spaces where cadets and crew can report harassment without fear of retaliation. Education around power dynamics, boundaries, and consent is essential. Perpetrators should face long-term professional consequences, not just be quietly moved elsewhere.

True Allies

One of the accounts demonstrated how crew did act promptly taking affirmative action to protect the woman following a particularly violent sexual attack:

The 3rd officer had me moved to her watch straight away, I just thought it was to get some more experience she had tried to talk to me seeing if anything was wrong, but I just acted like nothing was wrong as I didn't want to make a fuss. A lot of the crew had noticed I wasn't myself, as I was usually very loud and bubbly, and were asking the bridge team if I was okay. This then made the chief officer ask the 3rd officer and cadet (as we were the only girls on board and all very close) if they knew anything and they told him what they knew.

He then informed the captain who contacted the company straight away. The 3rd officer pulled me aside and told me she knew what had happened and I just completely broke down. The captain and chief officer then sat me down and told me they had informed the company, and they wanted a meeting with me. I had a zoom meeting with the company that same day where they informed me that N had been fired and escorted off the vessel that evening. As the vessel was at sea, they told me that it was best if I stayed the extra 3 weeks until crew change, then I wasn't travelling alone, but they would reduce my work hours on board because of how upset I was, so I agreed to that. The captain then called my mum for me as I just didn't know how to tell her. I had to write a statement for the company and then had to have another meeting with HR discussing it all again. The company paid for a therapist for me after it all as I became very depressed and tried to quit my job.

The assailant in question was fired, reported to their country's maritime authorities, and banned from working at sea again. This illustrates a caring, supportive response from the company with the appropriate consequences for the perpetrator. Yet the aftermath for the survivor can stretch on. Fortunately, the company recognised this:

I received therapy and support at company expense as well as other resources, and they donated to Safer Waves. I got check-in phone calls and emails to make sure I was okay. These were exceptionally helpful at such a traumatic time …. they very quickly found a suitable and specialized maritime trauma psychologist who they paid for unlimited sessions, removing the financial barrier as a cadet and the fear of seeking help, as it was right in front of me.

Other companies can learn from this case study ensuring consequences for the perpetrator and support for the survivor.

To end this section, we have given the last words to the women who have generously shared their stories:

Woefully, I have been on the other end of the phone, listening to her crying and despair, as she experiences a similar fate to what I once endured. Knowing exactly what trauma she is facing and the chains that bound her to her situation, it breaks my heart. It infuriates me that there are still women on board ships suffering in silence. While I might be free from it now, I will refuse to consider myself free from harassment, violence, and discrimination until we are all free from it. All I have left is my voice, and what we have suffered cannot all be for nothing.

We found with some of the respondents that they wanted to be activists campaigning against sexual harassment and sexual violence at sea:

I sometimes feel like I went through these things so others wouldn't have to but sadly, I know many still do. That's why I'm determined to speak up and support others. Through initiatives like the women's group, I want the next generation of female seafarers to feel safer, more connected, and less alone than I did.

It is suggested that alongside policy, protocols, and survivor aftercare, it is the speaking out that matters:

I can use my voice to drive positive change. I am not the woman I was before, but the woman I am today is fierce, driven, and dedicated to standing up for those women who are out there, battling for respect, dignity, and justice. The only question left to ask is, will you stand with me?

8. Discussion

What we learnt from the testimony of female seafarers.

Hearing about lived experiences is essential; but without a call to action, it will never be enough. So, we now want to look at what the call to action might look like, how success can be measured, and where accountability ought to lie. Until this happens, we won't make the progress that is so badly needed. We also look at what services already exist, and which are effective.

Services that support Female Seafarers

These are external organisations who offer a range of services and advocacy roles. They are all committed to helping women facing sexual violence, assault and harassment. By their very existence they facilitate important conversations.

It is vital that funding and resources for these services are increased and made available for organisations working to raise awareness of sexual violence and harassment. This means expansion of services which range from free helpline services and supportive women's networks, to high-quality resources and commissioning of research.

Organisations and Agencies

UK Women in Fisheries

UK Women in Fisheries provides a dual role, raising awareness of the crucial roles played by women in the sector and providing a supportive network for members including forums and advisory services. They believe that by doing so the fisheries sector will thrive. In 2024 they appointed a full-time network coordinator. They have also offered free online sessions on rights, harassment and culture in UK Fisheries for its members by an experienced facilitator.

Our members will get to know each other, support each other, and build a growing presence to improve the fisheries sector for a stronger, more resilient industry for everyone.

https://www.women-fisheries.com/

Confidential Human Factors Incident Reporting Programme (CHIRP)

CHIRP is an independent and impartial charity dedicated to improving safety in the air and

at sea. Their confidential human factors incident reporting system was set up to empower those working in the maritime sector to share their safety anonymously. Once the content is agreed by those who have reported the incident, CHIRP can follow up with the relevant organisations so that actions relating to safety concerns can be taken. As such, they fulfil the role of a whistle blowing service without leaving the employee vulnerable. As with UK Women in Fisheries the emphasis is on support whilst putting safety at the centre.

Their public facing website emphasises the correlation between one-off or repeated experiences of bullying, harassment and victimisation, and a deterioration in well-being, performance at work and mental health. Crucially, they highlight the relationship between a workplace where such behaviour is rife and condoned within a toxic overall company culture.

The procedure for reporting human-factor safety incidents, including sexual harassment, is via an app, website or email. Importantly, they make employees aware of their rights and the legal responsibilities of employers.

We understand that feeling safe and respected at work is crucial for everyone in maritime. Your employer is legally obliged to create a positive work environment free from bullying, harassment, discrimination or victimisation (abbreviated to BHDV). They should also have a written grievance procedure in place for all employees.

CHIRP collects BHDV statistics to identify how common these incidents are and what effects they have on maritime safety. As with similar organisations with a small number of paid employees, they are transparent in the scope of their role and their boundaries.

Whilst we are unable to investigate individual cases, nor assist with cases that involve industrial relations, terms and conditions of employment, we can signpost reporters to other independent charitable organisations who are better placed to assist in such matters.

As stated earlier, the challenge in maritime is that statistics do not always reflect the full extent of sexual violence and harassment as under-reporting is rife, making it difficult to accurately estimate the frequency of these incidents. More funded research is needed.

https://chirp.co.uk/maritime/

ISWAN

ISWAN is a membership network of international organisations dedicated to improving the welfare of seafarers. They do this through providing free helpline services, educational resources, relief funds and humanitarian support. They also work to drive change within the maritime sector for better health, safety and wellbeing amongst seafarers and their families, using data insights from their helplines to inform the development of new projects and services.

ISWAN's global campaign, '*Safe at sea...it takes all of us!*', is inclusive and focuses on empowering all seafarers to act as allies in support of their colleagues. The campaign provides practical guidance on addressing inappropriate behaviour and building strong support networks. It has two booklets for those working at sea and for maritime stakeholders.

Sailors' Society

Sailors' Society is a registered international maritime society. Peer-to-peer support groups offer a confidential community of support at sea. It has groups for all seafarers and those just for female crew, cadets, captains, LGBTQ+ seafarers, and families. It offers a female helpline 24/7 which means female cadets and seafarers can now choose to speak to a female from their helpline team.

Their Crisis Response Network provides around-the-clock assistance and counselling following critical incidents at sea (such as abuse, accidents, detentions, and emergencies). They have recently begun to offer trauma therapy grants and details of these can be found on their website.

There are two other organisations which have recently become hugely influential in the maritime sector and are dedicated to combating bullying, harassment and sexual violence. We now explore their origins and how their services have developed in more detail. They are as follows:

Salute Her UK

Salute Her UK was established in 2016 as a project within the military charity Forward Assist. From research and peer-led consultation groups emerged insights into the challenges female service personnel faced during and following service. Like the Merchant Navy the ratio of men vs women has always been disproportionate. Salute Her UK was registered as a charity and a separate entity from Forward Assist in 2021. In 2023 The Seafarers' Charity asked the charity to expand its services to women seafarers and has since funded this service.

Salute Her UK describes itself as a 'women-centric' charity based in the North East of England. A key feature of Salute Her UK is that it is led and staffed by professionally qualified staff with extensive experience in the health and social care sector. It has an all-women trustee board and staff team. Salute Her UK supports women who are in the Armed Forces, Veterans, and Women at Sea.

Salute Her UK provides trauma-informed therapy to support women in the armed forces, veterans with lived experience of sexual assault and associated trauma. We regularly consult with women in the Armed Forces, Veterans and Women at Sea so that our services are needs-led and person-centred. We conduct research, share best practice, inform and educate, raise awareness, deliver training and reach out to those in need.

Salute Her UK gave Parliamentary Evidence in 2022 based on research which drew on the experiences of 175 female participants

What is of particular significance was how women who received therapy after a rape or a sexual assault described the positive impact on their quality of life.

"I am safe, I have never felt safe before. I am not judged; I am listened to & for the first time since being in the military- I know this is not my fault."

"Control, that was taken away from me without my consent. Through therapy I have learned what choices I have in my life, it's refreshing."

"I am made to feel like I matter as someone cares. I am not a number. 7 months into therapy & I now believe I have a positive future."

A Dark Shadow: Understanding and Tackling Military Sexual Trauma in the UK (2024) Salute Her UK.

College-based groups set up by female cadets

One such example is The Warsash Women's Group. The group was established by female maritime cadets studying at Warsash Maritime School, Solent University.

They describe themselves as a supportive community dedicated to empowering women in the maritime industry during the early stages of their career.
Our mission is to create a space for connection, learning, and growth while fostering diversity and inclusion in this traditionally male-dominated field.

Through regular networking events, resource sharing, and inspiring guest speakers, they aim to empower and support women as they navigate their maritime careers. They pair phase one cadets with those in phases three and five to offer a bespoke peer-to-peer support system.

We would now like to look in detail at the origins, growth and rise of the maritime charity Safer Waves as a case study which offers both hope and a blueprint for service provision and activism.

Safer Waves

Safer Waves was established in 2019 by its founder, Captain Becky Golabek, after many years of hearing accounts from women at sea who had experienced abuse and sexual violence. At the time, industry conversations were beginning to take place, but these experiences were typically framed as "bullying and harassment." Though that was an important starting point, it often overlooked the reality that many female seafarers had been subjected to criminal offences.

The catalyst for action came after Captain Golabek read an article written by a female seafarer who spoke candidly about the behaviour she had endured throughout her career. Her honesty underscored the need for a more open and explicit conversation about the extent of sexual violence experienced by some seafarers — and reinforced the urgency of creating dedicated support and advocacy within the maritime sector.

The original intention was to create a website where female seafarers could see that they were not alone: a space where they could feel heard and reassured that what had happened to them mattered. During the development process, the founder recognised that male seafarers may also have been experiencing sexual violence, often facing even greater barriers to speaking out. The vision therefore evolved to ensure the platform supported seafarers of all genders. The aim was to combine the supportive ethos of UK rape and sexual abuse services with in-depth knowledge of the maritime industry.

Interest from maritime welfare organisations followed quickly. Early conversations were held with The Seafarers' Charity, The Mission to Seafarers, ISWAN, and UK-based Rape Crisis organisations, reflecting a shared recognition of the issue.

The Seafarers' Charity helped Safer Waves get registered and awarded their first small grant. This small grant enabled them to get started and to cover start-up costs including an email support service and recruitment of volunteers. They also have gone on to fund their first member of staff and now their first CEO. They have continually and directly financially supported this charity to exist and serve. Within months, the founder and board of trustees established Safer Waves as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation.

Since then, Safer Waves has grown rapidly. Alongside direct support, the organisation now raises awareness, delivers training, and contributes to workshops and conferences across the maritime sector.

Safer Waves' support email is an anonymous service, similar to Childline and Samaritans, and therefore they do not collect data on the people that access their service, only the number of contacts and type of contact. This means that whilst tracking systems are minimal, it provides those who make contact with reassurance that it is completely confidential. As the service grows, it intends to look at alternative methods to track training enquiries, donations and marketing.

In 2025 Safer Waves found approximately 10% of contacts were out of their remit, often related to general harassment and bullying, or employment/contractual issues. They were able to signpost these to appropriate organisations.

Safer Waves recognises, like Salute Her UK, that whilst sexual violence is a shared experience, the support required is rarely the same. Some individuals need emotional guidance, others

practical advice, employment or legal support, often in combination. The charity's approach is always led by the person's needs and priorities, ensuring that each person feels heard, understood, and empowered to make decisions about their next steps.

To complement this, Safer Waves works closely with Ocean Legal, with an option to provide clients with a free initial consultation to help them navigate their options and understand the legal pathways available. This partnership ensures that support is not only compassionate but also practical and actionable.

Between 2021 and 2024, contact levels remained relatively stable. However, as the charity expanded its reach and visibility, demand for support rose significantly. In 2025, the number of individuals contacting Safer Waves doubled. This increase may reflect greater industry awareness, a higher public profile, more open discussion within maritime, or a rise in reported incidents. Early indicators for 2026 show numbers on track to double again, underlining the clear and growing need for specialist support services at this critical point for the industry.

Social media engagement and website traffic have also increased steadily. It is important to recognise that seeking direct support is a significant step; many individuals may initially choose to access information, guidance, and resources online before deciding whether to make contact.

Safer Waves recruits volunteers by advertising or approaching persons of interest from a wide range of backgrounds, bringing diverse skills, experiences, and perspectives to the charity. All email volunteers are based in the UK, ensuring that safeguarding measures can be effectively applied if needed. The recruitment process includes careful vetting, role-specific training, and ongoing support, helping volunteers feel confident and equipped to provide safe, responsive, and professional guidance to those reaching out.

At Safer Waves, email support is never handled by a single person. When a message arrives, two volunteers collaborate to create a response, ideally combining maritime experience with expertise in psychology or counselling. Every draft is reviewed by a senior volunteer or staff member, ensuring accuracy and care while sharing responsibility. This layered process protects both the individuals reaching out to Safer Waves and the volunteers engaging with potentially distressing content unsupported.

Volunteers attend reflective practice sessions with a clinical psychologist, and staff are available between sessions to provide guidance and safeguard wellbeing. Beyond direct support, volunteers contribute across the charity, from social media and administration to profile building, reflecting a holistic approach to strengthening the charity whilst supporting those who need it.

Safer Waves collaborates with Rape Crisis South London to deliver *Understanding and Responding to Sexual Violence Training* for volunteers. The programme equips volunteers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to respond appropriately to disclosures of sexual harassment, sexual violence, or gender discrimination. Training covers the maritime context, clear definitions of sexual violence, risk factors, personal safety strategies, industry regulations, effective communication, reporting pathways, trauma-informed practice, and organisational procedures. Continuing professional development includes guest speakers from the industry and in-house updates.

The course is now available, adapted for maritime professionals and educators, to support safer environments on board and encourage the reporting and disclosure of sexual violence, while equipping participants with the tools to respond appropriately if someone comes forward.

In summary, Safer Waves is committed to supporting all seafarers who experience sexual violence or harassment at sea, regardless of rank or background. The charity provides training across all levels of the maritime industry, equipping individuals and organisations with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to prevent, recognise, and respond to harmful behaviour. Most importantly, Safer Waves offers dedicated in-house support to anyone affected by its courses, resources, or training sessions, ensuring that care and guidance are always available to those who need it.

Education and Training Initiatives

One way of addressing the problem may be to acknowledge that a correlation exists between training and reduction in incidents. Appropriate training could lead to appropriate responses, greater awareness and support for survivors.

In May 2024, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) approved amendments to the Standards for Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW) Code aimed at combating and

reducing violence and harassment within the maritime industry. On 1 January 2026, the new amendment to STCW TABLE A-V1/-4 took effect and introduced a mandatory requirement for all seafarers to undergo training on Prevention and Response to Violence and Harassment On Board Ships.

Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment amendments or SASH as it is known support related obligations under MLC Reg 4.3 and the ISM Code, so that colleges and companies have both a culture intervention and something they can evidence for auditors.

Training providers were instructed to incorporate the new requirements into Personal Safety and Social Responsibility (PSSR) courses delivered from 1 January 2026. The recommended minimum hours of training given for this is yet unspecified.
Whilst well intended, it is of concern that the vagueness and a lack of appreciation of the skills required to deliver such content may threaten successful outcomes.

The requirement for training would be improved if the trainers are required to be suitably experienced and qualified to facilitate sensitive discussions. While these sensitive topics are being brought to the surface, an individual may recall their own traumatic experience. If it isn't handled appropriately, and if the required supportive resources aren't readily available, it may be the last time they disclose.

The Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA) confirmed that seafarers who completed PSSR training before 1 January 2026 are not required to retake the course. Existing PSSR certificates issued by MCA-approved providers remain valid, with no requirement for reissue. UK-issued Certificates of Competency and Certificates of Proficiency will also continue to act as proof of PSSR training, in line with current guidance. A mandated requirement to regularly refresh such training would have signalled a stronger commitment to combating and reducing violence and harassment within the maritime industry.

Seafarers' response to this IMO announcement has varied. Some seafarers express concern about the financial implications for individual seafarers and, as we identified previously, the perceived poor quality of training courses. In their experience these appeared to be little more than a checklist rather than a genuine learning experience.

Others were offended that after many years of working on ships they are required to engage with something perceived to be in their own words 'woke nonsense' and 'garbage courses'.

Many objected to seafarers being singled out while shore staff remain exempt from the new training.

That said, a critical mass of other seafarers argued that maritime is now catching up with other safety critical industries. They suggested that if conversations about bullying and sexual harassment at work were normalised, this could lead to improved communication and empathy. They believe that the amendment sends a message to all survivors that violence and harassment at sea are being taken seriously. It also sends a clear message to perpetrators that their actions are unacceptable and that they should be held to account.

It is possible to be opposed to violence and harassment whilst still expressing some ambivalence about how the changes are implemented including the need for stronger responses from professional bodies.
The limitations of STCW on this subject and its existing standard framework are evidenced by the table outlining the new additional content to PSSR. This includes the following learning outcome:

'Basic knowledge and understanding of the consequences of violence and harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and sexual assault on victims, perpetrators, bystanders and stakeholders, and its effect on safety, health and well-being'

Such consequences are far from basic and to apply this term is an opportunity missed and far removed from the 'bold initiative' and 'decisive step' suggested by the IMO when celebrating Year of the Seafarer 2025.

It is anticipated that at the very least by the end of the course, participants will know the acceptable practices and procedures for the prevention and identification of violence, and all other forms of harassment.

Arguably, this amendment alone will not result in changing a complex set of beliefs and behaviours or necessarily make individuals feel safer. It is a step in the right direction covering the bare minimum of what should be considered standard practice. However, it must ultimately be supported by the management company and the owners. Without this support, it will be another course for which the certificate risks being filed away and forgotten. Unless this happens, the necessary progress that is so badly needed is unlikely to be made.

International crews

A crew whose members consist of people whose ethnicity involves differences, not only of language but of culture and religion, can present a challenge when facing prolonged periods on board. Several of the women we spoke to described how when they objected to sexual harassment were told to accept that certain nationalities showed a tendency to treat females worse, sexually harass more, misread signals etc. We argue such a point of view is divisive and distracts from the fact that misogyny and sexual harassment are always wrong as sexual assault and rape are criminal acts.

Masters and senior officers must state that they expect all crew to treat each other with dignity, respect, and compassion. In that way, the wellbeing and safety of people become part of the 'on-board culture' and are seen as "the way we do things around here." By modelling appropriate behaviour, leaders can discourage the acceptance and use of 'national stereotypes', 'racist tropes' and 'lazy generalities', while encouraging seafarers to tackle the challenges of cultural differences on board in real time.This can present a teachable moment which has the potential for long-lasting impact.

At the beginning of a voyage taking time to explore how cultural differences can impact communication can be time well spent. Inviting crew to give examples of where this may have led to misunderstandings, offence or puzzlement previously can be insightful. Such conversations, which can initially feel uncomfortable, can create the conditions for creating a more culturally aware environment. Cultural awareness and national pride rather than differences between nationalities should become the main focus.

Wider learning and development initiatives which benefit women

There are examples of committing to initiatives that foster talent and growth amongst women, this included taking swift action towards senior officers showing inappropriate behaviour towards female cadets.

Oldendorff Carriers were the winner of the Spinnaker 2025 Learning & Development Initiative with their Global Cadet Programme. This was a programme promoting merit-based advancement and diversity. The Cadet to Master trajectory ensures a structured development path with on board mentorship, cross-functional exposure and ongoing performance reviews. In 2024, Oldendorff had over 60% female deck cadets with representation from 17

nationalities which is considerably higher than other companies.

The judges, Spinnaker's Phil Parry, Editor-in-Chief of Tradewinds Julian Bray and Clyde Partner Heidi Watson said about the entry "Oldendorff are clearly committed to making change and going over and above what's expected of them. It's bold and has scale. They have identified a problem, have a plan and are attacking it head on. We (as judges) felt that 60% of new cadets being female was a staggering figure and showed that Oldendorff are sticking their neck out in an attempt to make real change."

Such initiatives are important because they demonstrate that under the right conditions women will thrive.

Global Maritime Project

An exciting new initiative is the Unspoken project. It was launched in April 2026 by the All Aboard Alliance, a community of maritime companies committed to improving lives at sea.

As with this report it recognises the importance of using personal experience of sexual misconduct to inform internal company assessment processes and responses, prevention measures and care pathways for survivors. The intention is for these stories to inform the development of the industry's first consistent, global framework.

"Lack of data and visibility is a significant issue for the maritime industry, particularly when it comes to issues as sensitive and hidden as sexual misconduct," says Meei Wong, CEO of Circle Digital Ventures and All Aboard Alliance Co-Chair. "The Alliance is therefore beginning this process by listening to seafarers to better understand where systems fail and succeed. Incorporating seafarer perspectives from the outset will ensure the framework is grounded in lived experience, making it more likely to be genuinely impactful."

Unspoken has been funded by The Seafarers' Charity, which supports projects and organisations working to improve the safety, well-being, and quality of life of seafarers and their families worldwide. Other project partners include The Seafarers' Charity (funders), SAFETY4SEA (media partner), The Mission to Seafarers, Safer Waves, ISWAN, Sailors' Society, TURTLE, and UK Women in Fisheries.

By supporting this project, companies contribute to the development of a practical, industry-

wide framework built on anonymised insights from seafarers. The aim is to identify systemic gaps and create clear, workable standards that organisations of different sizes and regions can implement in their own operations.

Sensitive topics and difficult conversations on board

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." - **Maya Angelou**

Responding to incidents of sexual harassment and sexual abuse is a crucial component of effective leadership at sea.

The ability to be able to talk with one's fellow crew members about sensitive and emotive matters is an integral part of life at sea, especially for senior personnel. Difficult conversations with individuals and groups can include managing accusations of bullying, sexual harassment, racism, misogyny, and homophobia. They may observe or have reported to them such attitudes and behaviours on board and are obliged to respond. If these situations are ignored, there can be a potentially catastrophic and irreversible impact on productivity, safety, morale, and well-being of survivors.

Achieving successful outcomes in such situations depends on developing an emotionally intelligent approach to leadership. One which places a value on soft skills and sees them as of equal importance to technical skills. Emotional intelligence is the ability by the individual to understand and manage their own emotions and recognize the influence on the emotions of those around us. It is characterised by practising compassion; self-awareness; inclusivity; cooperation and effective communication skills.

It is clear how in many of the incidents described earlier different responses from senior staff members would have resulted in the women being better protected and their distress mitigated. It is essential to uphold professional standards, set clear expectations, hold others to account, and not avoid difficult conversations. Such an approach will increase crew engagement and performance including safety and, above all, it will help retain talent and make people feel valued.

A number of the women who shared their experiences were at the beginning of their careers. If the maritime industry is focused on capacity building and succession planning they must

recognise that compassionate and supportive leadership behaviours on board play a vital role in shaping Merchant Navy cadets' engagement, persistence, and sense of belonging, particularly during periods of vulnerability (Kind Leadership Report 2023 MPC).

9. Recommendations

Prevention

The IMO amendments to training won't be enough to bring the change needed. It is essential that shipping companies, fishing and maritime organisations alongside training providers and colleges ensure that:

- Maritime colleges promote a safe culture and zero tolerance for inappropriate behaviour – thereby clearly establishing expectations of acceptable behaviour at sea from the start of a seafaring career.
- Learning and teaching approaches are selected for maximum relevance and ensure engaged participants within a safe learning environment, including creating opportunities for reflection and self-awareness.
- Maritime colleges and sponsors of cadets should improve and enhance their practices around safeguarding of cadets when completing their sea time training.
- Training courses balance the delivery of factual context with extremely sensitive, divisive and personal topics in a restricted period.
- Instructors, companies, training providers and colleges know what to do if a recent or historic sex crime including a criminal act comes to light.
- The existing MCA auditing regime ensures consistency and quality standards based on best pedagogic practice for this amendment.
- Relevant training should be given, and meaningful mentoring offered which focuses on the application of effective principles and strategies to help leaders start rather than avoid difficult conversations.
- Training should apply to everyone including new crew members and HR staff working onshore. If cost is an issue, it should not fall to the individual and instead it should be paid for by companies.
- To ensure that sexual harassment and sexual assault training is accredited, fit-for-purpose, and delivered by suitable practitioners. Training should be mandatory and ongoing for all employees. There should be additional specialist training for individuals who must formally respond to incidents.

Safe Reporting

- More support should be given to masters and senior officers by the company in the investigation of sexual harassment and assault cases, so they feel empowered to act in a sensitive manner. Ensure that companies offer support to survivors such as granting extended leave, checking in regularly and providing therapy.
- When starting a conversation about an alleged sexual harassment or sexual assault, ensure a quiet and confidential space. Allow the individual to bring a trusted colleague along if they wish for support.
- If individuals want to make a formal complaint, provide information on the different ways to report, as well as outlining what support is available.
- If they choose not to formally report, it's good practice to keep a confidential record of the conversation, outline what support is available in the workplace and identify a time to check in.
- Have a list of local specialist support services that's easily accessible and signpost to appropriate organisations such as Safer Waves, Salute Her UK, and CHIRP.
- Ensure all the facts are available before deciding on a course of action. So, what happened, when and why? Who was involved? Having possession of all the facts will be determined by a willingness and ability to actively listen to what is being said and asking for specific examples.
- State that there will be consequences for perpetrators. This will include having to leave the vessel. Doing this gives a clear signal that psychological safety is paramount.
- Implement safe avenues for employees to speak up, report and seek help about any negative experiences. This should be beyond their usual line management structure and external to the vessel.

Supporting Specialist Help

- Support the growth and development of specialist services such as Safer Waves so that they can expand their services, deliver bystander training and employ additional paid staff such as a team of caseworkers who can help survivors navigate reporting options, employers, regulators and legal jurisdictions and options.
- Support the development and promotion of Salute Her UK to provide their trauma-informed support services to female victims of sexual violence in the merchant and fishing

fleets.

- Support the development of a specialist reporting framework to improve employers' responses when handling reports of sexual violence at sea. Ensure that reporting is a safe experience and that a woman is not disadvantaged in terms of career progression when making a report.
- Support the development and promotion of women-only peer groups and mentoring services. With a focus on cadets supported and mentored by experienced seafarers.
- Consider supporting the development of a confidential advocacy service for survivors of sexual harassment or violence.
- Consider developing materials to support cadets and new seafarers to know their rights at sea.

Leadership and Culture

- Those in leadership positions on board should clearly state their expectations of the crew's behaviour on board including ways of working together and looking after each other. It must be made clear that inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated and should be brought to them immediately.
- They should always make it clear to all crew members that they will not tolerate harassment on board. This includes physical advances, inappropriate comments, trolling, exclusion, and gender-based undermining.
- Concerns about inappropriate behaviour should be addressed early on, rather than allowing poor behaviour to become normalised and entrenched.
- To recognise that respectful, compassionate, and attentive listening can be healing. By contrast, controlling, blaming, or invalidating responses can exacerbate the damage and create a culture on board that legitimises sexual harassment and assault.

Systemic Change

- Companies must recognise that predominantly male working environments can present a challenging environment for women to work in. They need to ensure the working environment at sea is safe for women in terms of leadership, expected behaviours and consequences for wrongdoing. Ways of doing this include:
- Contracts of employment and HR policies should clearly state to all crew members that the

company will not tolerate sexual harassment on board. This includes physical advances, inappropriate comments, trolling, exclusion, and gender-based undermining.

- Company policies should explicitly state that there will be consequences for alleged perpetrators. This will include having to leave the vessel while an investigation is completed.
- Companies need to ensure that there are serious repercussions, including dismissal, for any person who has committed a sexual crime and that all proper legal actions will be taken against them.
- To make available information to support bystanders, including how to take action as a bystander witnessing sexual harassment with bystander training to be funded. This could utilise resources created through the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) allyship campaign 'Safe at Sea …. It takes all of us'. Further information: https://www.iswan.org.uk/our-work/safe-at-sea-campaign/
- Consider training all crew on the 5Ds of active bystander intervention – Distract, Delegate, Document, Delay, and Direct with bystander training to be funded by employers.
- To support the Global Maritime Forum's Unspoken project which aims to develop a framework for maritime companies to better identify, prevent, and respond to sexual misconduct at sea. https://unspokenproject.org/
- Consider the development of a process that offers opportunities for redress, such as formal apologies from companies and/or perpetrators and appropriate compensation.
- To explore ways to prevent perpetrators of serious sexual crimes simply finding reemployment in other companies including sub-contractors.
- Develop a framework to assist all companies to review their workplace culture, processes, and work and living conditions to identify factors which allow sexual harassment to persist
- To establish acceptable standards for accommodation facilities on board, including security and other safety measures (including lighting, locks, CCTV, public area layouts).

10. Conclusion

Sexual harassment and sexual violence continue to be underreported. In our experience, women tell us that they did not report their sexual assault. Some of the reasons given included that women wanted to forget about it and move on, did not want more people to know about it, and experienced guilt, shame, humiliation, and significant emotional distress.

In the merchant seafarer context, several of the women who shared their 'lived experiences' did not feel safe enough to report due to fear of backlash from the perpetrator or repercussions from the company.

Underreporting also stems from misogynistic attitudes around the legitimacy of women at sea that still exist today; women fear they will not be believed or taken seriously.

As we have seen even after women have summoned the courage to report, the cycle of collusion continues with suffering going unseen, unheard and dismissed without any consideration for the long-term harm that may have been caused.

Ultimately, sexual criminal offences (because this is what they are) take place all too frequently leaving women trapped in a confined environment, unable to escape their perpetrator.

There are some indicators of change and some green shoots are appearing; however, real systemic change remains slow.

Whilst we wait, it is suggested that energy should be expended, and resources should be made available to support the survivors. Compelling evidence from Salute Her UK would indicate that this allows women some opportunity to recover and heal from traumatic experience. These are safe spaces where trauma is accepted and understood. We have also seen new communities and networks coming together in activism determined to hold companies to account for failing to protect.

It is argued in this report that sexual harassment and sexual violence are not cultural, not sexual but criminal. The repertoire of sexual violence can be variable so this needs to be viewed through the widest possible lens, creating the appropriate systems of disclosure. We ask under what circumstances would survivors come forward? Paying attention to where there are low levels of sexual abuse and why this is allows for a meaningful disruption of the cycle.

The biggest success we have seen is through the impact of organisations such as Safer Waves and Salute Her UK, in helping survivors. These are safe spaces where trauma is accepted and understood. We have also seen new communities and networks coming together in activism determined to hold companies to account for failing to protect.

Currently, shame sits with the survivor, not the perpetrator, yet in the words of Gisèle Pelicot:

'Shame must change sides.'

11. Bibliography

Developing soft skills in Mariners: A facilitators handbook (2024) Prof. Carole Davis

Sexual Offences at Sea: Experiences of Victimisation, Witnessing and Reporting (2025) Dr Genevieve F. Waterhouse, Dr Gary Lancaster & Dr Jordan Randell
Safer Waves & Department of Psychology, University of Winchester

No Man's Land: Research Studies to Explore the Experience & Needs of Women Veterans
Salute Her UK
This seminal two-part series Part 1 (2019) and Part 2 (2022) represents the first major ethnographic studies detailing the hidden voices, struggles, and specific transition challenges of women veterans in the UK.

A Dark Shadow: Understanding and Tackling Military Sexual Trauma in the UK (2024)
Salute Her UK
This research report was funded by the Office for Veterans' Affairs and examines the profound, long-term impacts of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) on the lives and mental health of survivors.

Submission to the Defence Committee: Women in the Armed Forces (2021)
Salute Her and Forward Assist have submitted crucial written evidence to UK Parliament Committees. Data and findings from Salute Her reports were heavily referenced in the Ministry of Defence's Defence Sub-Committee report, "Protecting Those That Protect Us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life".

A Hymn to Life: Shame has to Change Sides (2026) Gisèle Pelicot

Sexual Offences at Sea: Experiences of Victimisation, Witnessing and Reporting (2025) Dr Genevieve F. Waterhouse, Dr Gary Lancaster & Dr Jordan Randell. Safer Waves & Department of Psychology, University of Winchester

Maritime Professional Council Report on Kind Leadership Report (2023) Prof. Carole Davis, Capt. John Wright and Steve Cameron

The Women Seafarers Report (2022) by The Mission to Seafarers

The port-based welfare needs of women seafarers (2023) International Research Centre Cardiff University Prof. Helen Sampson & Dr. Iris Acejo. www.sirc.cf.ac.uk

12. Helpful Organisations

CHIRP

https://chirp.co.uk/maritime

Global Maritime Forum (Unspoken Project)

https://unspokenproject.org

https://globalmaritimeforum.org/press/unspoken-project-to-help-maritime-industry-address-sexual-misconduct-at-sea/

International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network

https://www.iswan.org.uk

The Mission to Seafarers

https://www.missiontoseafarers.org

Sailors' Society

https://sailors-society.org

Safer Waves

https://www.saferwaves.org/

Salute Her UK

https://www.saluteher.co.uk

UK Women in Fisheries Network

https://www.women-fisheries.com

the seafarers' charity

The Seafarers' Charity
8 Hatherley Street
London SW1P 2QT

020 7932 0000
contact@theseafarerscharity.org

To visit The Seafarers' Charity website, please scan the QR code or visit:
theseafarerscharity.org

Registered with FUNDRAISING REGULATOR

The Seafarers' Charity is a Registered Charity, no. 226446 in England and Wales, incorporated under Royal Charter. Registered in Scotland, no. SC038191.