

## Public Perceptions about Women Pursuing the Seafaring Career a Case of Ghana

Felicity Ankoma - Sey

Regional Maritime University, Ghana, PO Box GP. 1115, Accra, Ghana  
E-mail of the corresponding author: [felicity.ankoma-sey@rmu.edu.gh](mailto:felicity.ankoma-sey@rmu.edu.gh)

### Abstract

There have been positive responses to international calls for more females to also join the seafaring profession, but the growth rate is rather slow even with advancements in ship technology, which continues to make seafaring less strenuous than it used to be. There are many known internal positive and negative perceptions about women in seafaring. The studies sort for external perceptions on the matter and whether the Ghanaian public would encourage their females to pursue seafaring. Secondary data was used to trace the trend of female enrolment at the RMU from 2004 to date. The percentage of females was insignificant. Perceptions of Ghana's general public sampled from communities close to Tema Port and to RMU (i.e. Tema and Nungua) were collated. It was realized that few would encourage their female relatives to pursue seafaring because of its high income potentials, especially if it were for short sea hauls. Younger females were more likely to consider it. Majority would not encourage their females, major reasons being that the job was risky and that women played the natural role of maintaining a favorable emotional environment in society. Perception about the most cherished ambition for many women was to have a happy/successful family life. In conclusion, few people knew of the improvements in seafaring conditions. Seafaring may become attractive to young females in Ghana with the emergence of the short sea or coastal shipping industry. Recommendations included giving more publicity to the seafaring profession in its present state and introducing more diversity into seafaring courses to make both male and female graduates versatile, thus capable of making other career choices in their future when they opt to stay ashore.

**Keywords:** Female seafarers, Career, Public perceptions

### Introduction

It is clear today that globalization has become possible partially as a result of the breakthroughs in transport, for which maritime transport has dominated. It is said to carry approximately 80% of the volume and 70% in value of the world's trade (UNCTAD, 2012). Maritime transport and seafaring dates many years B.C. and there are no intentions in this paper for a thorough tracing of their histories. All the same, it is worth noting how the average size and speed of merchant ships have increased, and also how the technology for navigation and working of ships has been simplified.

The size of pure container ships (fully cellular vessel) for example has increased over the past few decades from a size of carrying 1000 twenty equivalent units (TEU) of containers in the 1970's through to carrying 15,000 TEU in the year 2006. Presently, there are *post new panamax containerhips that can carry up to 18,000 TEU* and there are plans on the drawing boards of ship building yards around the world to construct vessels to carry up to 25, 000 TEU (Ashar and Rodrigue, 2012). The average size of cruise liners, tankers and various other ship types have also grown concurrently so as to provide scale economies with their use. Ships are being designed on the average to steam twice faster than they used to, at speeds between 21–25 knots (38.9-46.3 km/h), which allows them to complete voyages in much shorter times than previously. Also the use of sextants for navigation, which was quite a complex technology, has been replaced by the satellite - dependent Global Positioning Systems (GPS). The practice where Dockers lift cargo on their backs or heads when loading or offloading ships is steadily being phased out. In its place, ships are loaded and discharged of their complex cargoes by the use of computer controls. These and many other technological innovations, supported by international regulatory interventions, has made seafaring less strenuous and safer than it used to be. Thus the physical strength that was required from seafarers to enable them work on ships has become quite issues of the past.

For centuries untold, seafaring has been a male dominated industry but as trends continue to change, much effort is being placed on pulling women out of the periphery into the mainstream of manning ships. Women are being encouraged to take up roles as marine engineers and deck officers, to mention a few. The International Maritime Organization's (IMO) leading role to promote this course is noted in Resolution 14 of the Convention on Standards of Training and Watch keeping (STCW, 2001), where it was seen to be making conscious and serious effort in promoting women participation in seafaring by securing equal access to men and women in the seafaring and allied industries and highlighting the role of women in the seafaring profession. In addition to the IMO's role, there have been many other interventions from other organizations. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reported of a positive response to this call for women in the past 50 years. But though the

response is positive, the rate of entrance of women into the profession has been relatively slow.

The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) also has worked to protect the rights of women seafarers championing the cause for a reduction of gender stereotypes within the industry for many. Some of the causes which the ITF has championed include the provision of sanitary items on board ships; providing access to confidential medical advice, the contraceptive and morning-after pill; consistent and improved approach to maternity benefits and rights; and development of sexual harassment policies and appropriate training (ITF, 2012). Notwithstanding the call and the provisions to improve the attractiveness of the profession, the population of females continues to be very low. The ITF reported that women made up an estimated 2% of the world's maritime workforce, and mostly took up jobs on ferries and cruise ships (ITF, 2012).

Women who had pursued the seafaring career were most often said to have faced challenges on their jobs. Some of the challenges were: - being worst paid even though their performance on the job was comparable to their male counterparts; confronted with discrimination, bullying and harassment (Capellan, 2013). Similar challenges were pointed out by Capellan (2013) in her studies in Asia on the problems encountered by women seafarers on board ships as perceived by MAAP midship women. These challenges were confirmed by Aggrey (2000). In addition, women sailing on ships flying Flags of Convenience were unlikely to have maternity rights (ITF, 2012).

The few women who have ventured into the seafaring career may have done so for various reasons. Some reasons as reported by Capellan were: - for the love of travel, seafaring was a unique profession, its demand was high in terms of salaries, for practicality sake and most importantly, women cadets wanted to improve their family's lifestyle. Capellan's studies further suggested that there were both positive and negative perceptions about women seafarers in Asia. Positive perceptions were that: - Asian women were being adventurous; they loved challenges; they could easily adjust to new environment and were hard working. The negative perceptions were that women were potential sources of trouble to marital relationships of their male counterparts; there was inequality in task distribution on board as women were looked at as the weaker sex and furthermore the women were prone to harassment.

The then Ghana Nautical College was built with the mission of training seafarers to man the demised national shipping line of Ghana. This institution evolved through being the Regional Maritime Academy to become the Regional Maritime University, Ghana as it stands today. Through its evolution, the institution has seen many years of training seafarers for the West African Sub-region and beyond. But just like the Asia situation as reported earlier, the ratio of the male and female populations trained throughout the period have been nowhere close to a balance even with the thorough marketing of the institution.

It is very interesting to note that though the number of women seafarers trained is not high, many of them have had very successful careers and today occupy very prominent positions in the world's maritime industry. Tracing the history in those early years of the Ghana Nautical College, a few female seafarers were trained to be officers for Ghana's national shipping line. These women rose to high ranks in the seafaring hierarchy. Some of them were Captain Beatrice Vormawah, who became the first Ghanaian female ship captain taking full command as master and sailing Ghana's ships on international voyages (Aggrey, 2000); Captain Hannah Aggrey; Captain Georgina Hanson - Nortey and Captain Catherine Haizel. Aggrey (2000) provides a directory of other women around the world who rose to very high ranks as seafarers. Some names that stood out in Aggrey's work were Captain Anna Schetinina from Russia, Victoria Drummond from United Kingdom, Captain Elizabeth Datson from Australia, Wang Yafu and Liu Xiuqi from China, Mary Frances Culname from America, Andrea Castro Rosales from Chile and Myrna Galang Daite from the Philippines. What was however interesting to note also in Aggrey's work was that most of the women after relatively short times as active seafarers, retired to take up other maritime related jobs ashore. Another category of successful female seafarers Aggrey reported on were officers on ferries and pilots. She mentioned Anna Laurell from Sweden who was said to be the first female pilot in the South of Bothnia region. Ferries and Pilot boats do not normally engage in very long distance hauls. Aggrey, 2000 in her work, gave account of research done by Sjörapporten, 2000, which sort to suggest that women who love to go to sea also love to be at home.

## **2. Research problem**

The challenges faced by women within the seafaring industry are universal and surmountable. This account for the success stories of the few women including Ghanaians who have ventured into the industry. But despite the successes of the few women and the clarion calls for more women to join the industry, the population of women from Ghana who opt to pursue this career is insignificant compared to other careers such as logistics, port management, shipping management, medicine, business administration, law, marketing, accounting, agricultural science and architecture to mention a few. There may be other perceptions outside the industry which may vary from region to region in the world and those external perceptions could dictate or influence the pace of growth or decline of the population of women that enter or remain in the seafaring profession.

### 3. Objectives

The objectives of the research were to provide statistical details of the ratio of the male and female population of cadets who have enrolled at the Regional Maritime University (R. M. U.), Ghana over the years and further to find out the external societal perceptions about women pursuing this career, which could have possibly influenced the trend of female student enrolment to the R. M. U. Specifically, the research sought to find answers to questions raised on the following subject matter.

- General perceptions about seafaring as a career.
- Knowledge of the existence of institutions in Ghana offering training in seafaring.
- Willingness to encourage female relations (e.g. daughter/ sister/ wife etc.) to pursue careers in seafaring and reasons.
- Most cherished ambition of women in Ghana.

### 4. Methodology

Data from the Registry of the Regional Maritime University from 2003 to 2012 were collated, analyzed and presented pictorially to show the trends with regards to male and female enrolment on the major diploma and degree programs. In addition, an exploratory survey was conducted to solicit the views of the general public from the population in Tema and Nungua in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana, on their perception about seafaring as a career for women. The choice of population was based on the following assumptions:

- Firstly, that one of Ghana's maritime ports is located in Tema and is very close to the Nungua Township, presupposing that there was a relatively high probability that people from those areas had seen ships before and had a fair idea of what seafaring was all about.
- Secondly, that Tema and Nungua were cosmopolitan townships and therefore a sample of the population is likely bring to bear the views of people of all cultures and creed.

The sample size chosen for the research was one hundred and twenty (120). The views of 120 respondents walking by selected streets in the Tema and Nungua Township were randomly solicited by means of a questionnaire guide. The questions asked were in line with of the topic issues captured in the research conducted by Campellan (2013). The data gathered was coded, processed and analyzed using the Census and Survey Processing System (Cspiro) and the Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

### 5. Findings, analysis, conclusions and recommendations

#### 5.1 Findings

##### 5.1.1 Student enrolment statistics at Regional Maritime University Ghana (RMU) (2003 - 2012)

Besides one Master of Arts program jointly run by the RMU and the University of Ghana, the RMU currently has on offer six first degree courses and one diploma course. Out of this lot, the Bachelor in Nautical Studies and Bachelor in Marine Engineering are two courses that prepare students purely for careers in seafaring. Figures 1 and 2 are detailed statistics in bar charts that depict the gender distribution of students who were enrolled for Marine Engineering and Nautical Science courses respectively from 2003 to 2012.

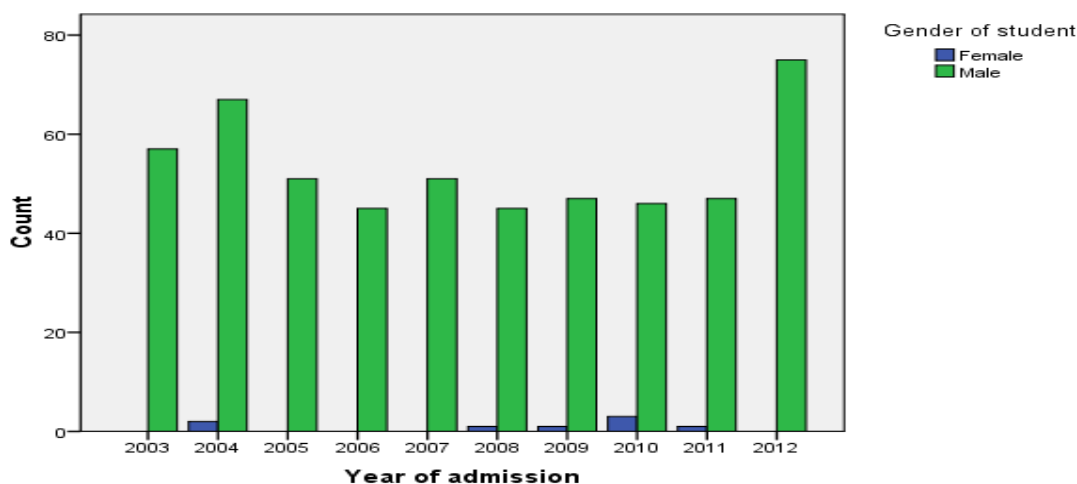
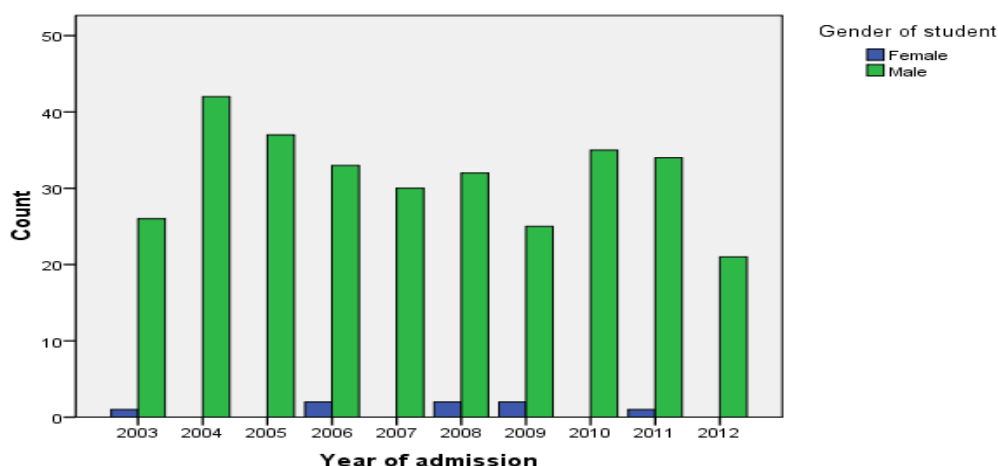


Figure 1. Gender distribution of Marine Engineering Science students between 2009 and 2012



**Figure 2. Gender distribution of Nautical Science students between 2009 and 2012**

5.1.2 Public perceptions about women pursuing careers in seafaring

Eighty (80) respondents from the general public saw seafaring to be a good profession, twenty-one (21) thought it was prestigious whilst eighteen (18) respondents thought otherwise. Sixteen out of the eighteen who perceived seafaring as bad were female. Table one provides a gender and age breakdown of the responses to the question whether respondents will encourage their female relative to pursue seafaring.

Table 1. Public responses to... encouraging females to pursue seafaring as a career

| Sex          | Age          | Responses            |                      |                    | Total     |
|--------------|--------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------|
|              |              | Yes                  | No                   | Ratios<br>Yes : No |           |
| Female       | 20-29        | 8                    | 13                   | 1 : 1.6            | 21        |
|              | 30-39        | 3                    | 10                   | 1 : 3.3            | 13        |
|              | 40-49        | 2                    | 8                    | 1 : 4              | 10        |
|              | 50 and above | 1                    | 7                    | 1 : 7              | 8         |
| <b>Total</b> |              | <b>14 ( 13.33% )</b> | <b>38 ( 36.19% )</b> |                    | <b>52</b> |
| Male         | 20-29        | 7                    | 17                   | 1 : 2.4            | 24        |
|              | 30-39        | 6                    | 11                   | 1 : 1.8            | 17        |
|              | 40-49        | 3                    | 4                    | 1 : 1.3            | 7         |
|              | 50 and above | 4                    | 1                    | 1 : 0.25           | 5         |
| <b>Total</b> |              | <b>20 ( 19.05% )</b> | <b>33 ( 31.43% )</b> |                    | <b>53</b> |

On the whole, majority of respondents (67.62%) would not recommend seafaring as a career for their female relatives whilst minority (32.38%) would. It was also noted generally that more female (36.19%) than male (31.43%) respondents would not recommend it. However, amongst those who recommend it, more male (19.05%) than female (13.33%) respondents would encourage their female relations to pursue seafaring. Where seafaring was encouraged for females, 90% of respondents opted for them to engage in short sea hauls. Sixty-five percent (65%) of all respondents knew of the existence of an institution in Ghana (Regional Maritime University) that was into the training of seafarers.

Table 2 shows the ratios of responses and associated reasons received from the public with respect of encouraging or discouraging their female relatives from pursuing careers in seafaring.

Table 2. Reasons associated with encouraging or discouraging females pursuing seafaring

| Response                               | Reasons for responses according to gender | Male        | Female     | Total percentage |
|--|---|-------------|------------|------------------|
| <b>Will encourage</b><br>(40/ 33.33%)  | High Income                               | 22 (15.83%) | 10 (7.19%) | 23.02            |
|  | Others                                    | 5           | 5          | 7.19             |
|  | <b>Total Reasons</b>                      | <b>27</b>   | <b>15</b>  | <b>30.22</b>     |
| <b>Will discourage</b><br>(80/ 66.67%) | Cost of Training                          | 8           | 8          | 11.51            |
|  | Home makers                               | 10          | 15         | 17.99            |
|  | Promiscuousness                           | 5           | 10         | 10.79            |
|  | Risky                                     | 10          | 13         | 16.55            |
|  | Job suitable for men only                 | 8           | 1          | 6.47             |
|  | Others                                    | 2           | 7          | 6.47             |
|  | <b>Total Reasons</b>                      | <b>43</b>   | <b>54</b>  | <b>69.78</b>     |

#### 5.1.3 Positive responses

The major reason for the (23.02 %) who would encourage seafaring for females was that it was high income earning. Responses grouped under 'Others' (7.19%) included interest in adventure and the opportunity to learn other cultures.

#### 5.1.4 Negative responses

Two major reasons were associated to why (34.54%) of respondents would not encourage seafaring for women. They were: - women were home makers (17.99%), and the job was risky (16.55 %).

The cost of training seafarers ranked third with respect to reasons why people would not encourage seafaring for women (11.51%). It was also alleged by (10.79 %) that women were prone to promiscuous behavior and it was interesting to note here also that more women than men made the above assertions. Responses grouped under others (6.47%), include job insecurity, sea sickness and negative psychological feeling of not fitting into society after spending some period away from home.

5.1.5 Women's most cherished ambition  
 Though some mentioned successful careers, over eighty five percent (87.53%) of the general public believed ultimately that the most cherished ambition of women in Ghana was to have successful family lives and happy homes.

#### 5.2 Analysis

Though thoughts of females pursuing seafaring was not seen as unacceptable, the analysis of all the statistics created the picture that women from Ghana were not encouraged generally to pursue the seafaring career. This was especially so if it were for long sea hauls. It was interesting to note that the possibility of earning very high incomes was not a so much an 'attraction' for women in Ghana. The cost of training being a deterrent mentioned by 11.51% of the public was not convincing to the researcher as the study showed that there wasn't a significant difference in cost comparing the fees charged for pursuing a seafaring course at the RMU to the fees charged for other degree courses in other private tertiary institutions in Ghana, where a very large population of females pursued careers.

It was interesting to note also that the public did not even consider the possible challenges women could encounter in the industry (*such as harassment from their male counterparts and the related promiscuousness*) as a deterrent to entering the industry. Instead they ascribe reasons primarily to the job being risky and to the fact that women are homemakers.

It was observed from the ratio of the responses (*see table 1.0*) that more females from 30 years and above would not encourage women to pursue seafaring as a career. This could possibly have been because most women in Ghana around this age seriously seek to find their life partners and are also in the child bearing and raising age. The ratio pattern for this notion was opposite for male respondents in the same age bracket.

#### 5.3 Conclusions

The analysis showed that the situation in Asia with respect to women pursuing seafaring in Asia is not very different from the situation in Ghana. With the study, it was realized that both men and women knew about seafaring as an existing career that could be pursued. However there were misconceptions that the career was strenuous and associated with a lot of risk. It was quite obvious that people in Ghana did not know much about the technological developments in ships and seafaring, which had made seafaring less strenuous. This could be because shipping has become very serious business today, and in order to make high returns on their investments, ship-owners and other stakeholders want their ships to spend very short time in ports where they encounter high operational costs. Also due to the international treaties on security standards and other local security measures adopted at ports of countries, public visits to ships are restricted. For these reasons, school children and others no longer have opportunities to visit ships when they arrive in ports; where they could have familiarized with the

technological trends and where they could develop the interest to pursue seafaring careers. Furthermore, because Ghana as a nation no longer has ships and very few Ghanaians privately own ships, one hardly sees or hears about documentaries and programs on shipping being shown or aired on national media. These could have led to the misconceptions in seafaring.

Again majority of the public identify with the natural role of the feminine gender as being the bedrock and the builders of homes; and as the gender which has what it takes to create and sustain a stable emotional environment in society and national economies. A majority of women themselves do not seem to be enthused about seafaring in its present state where they would be taken away from their homes for a substantial period of time. For these reasons, society generally does not consider seafaring that much when it comes to selecting careers for women.

The findings of the research do not support the notion that females in Ghana do not have the financial means to pursue the seafaring career and therefore need financial assistance in the forms of scholarships and bursaries. Neither does it support the notion that the place of women is at home and in the kitchen. The research found out that there was a near balance of male and female pursuing various degree programs in universities in the country. For example, 2012 statistics from the University of Ghana, Legon, indicated that there was a student population of about 29754 and the male to female ratio was 1: 2 (UG, 2013). Also 430 students were said to have been admitted at the postgraduate level at the University of Cape-Coast the same year 2012. Out of that population, 139 were females and 294 were males (UCC, 2012). This implies that women pursue various careers but are mindful of their roles of creating and sustaining conducive and stable emotional environment which seems to fall naturally on all female species.

It may be possible that to see more women joining the profession when coastal shipping, which involves much shorter hauls develops in the sub region. This would possibly make women able to work and also enjoy the privileges of fulfilling their nature given roles of stabilizing and sustaining the emotional environment in society.

#### 5.4 Recommendations

Coastal shipping and inland water transportation are industries which have high growth prospects in Ghana and in the ECOWAS region. If these industries are developed, more women are likely to pursue seafaring. This is because these industries require relatively shorter times away from home compared to ocean shipping. This may permit them to an extent to play their roles of creating and sustaining stable emotional environments in society.

Noting also that there are a few women who would choose to pursue seafaring careers notwithstanding the prevailing conditions, it is recommended that some diversity is introduced into the seafaring courses to make graduates versatile and capable of making other career choices in their future if they retire or opt to stay ashore.

There should also be public education on how safe and less strenuous shipping is today. This may take away the perceptions the public has in this regard and therefore encourage more females to pursue seafaring.

#### References

- Aggrey, H. A. (2000). Women in the maritime industry: A review of female participation and the role of maritime education and training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unpublished MA dissertation, World Maritime University, Malmö.
- Ashar and Rodrigue, (2013,) Evolution of Container ships. *The geography of transport systems*. <http://people.hofstra.edu/geotrans/eng/ch3en/conc3en/containerships.html> retrieved on 2/2/2013.
- Capellan E. R. (2013). Problems encountered by women seafarers on board ships as perceived by MAAP midship women: Its implications on MET innovations. [www.maap.edu.ph/.../13-A%20Problems%20Encountered%20by%20.doc](http://www.maap.edu.ph/.../13-A%20Problems%20Encountered%20by%20.doc). retrieved on 1/3/2013
- Ghana Business News: (2012/09/2) University of Cape-Coast admits 4818 fresher students <http://www.ghanabusinessnews.com/2012/09/24/university-of-cape-coast-admits-4818-fresher-students/>, retrieved on 12/12/2013.
- International Maritime Organization. (2001). International Convention on standards of training, certification and watch keeping for seafarers 1978, as amended in 1995 and 1997. IMO, London.
- International Transport Workers Federation (2012). Women Seafarers. *ITF Seafarers* . <http://www.itfseafarers.org/ITI-women-seafarers.cfm> retrieved on 2/2/2013
- UNCTAD. (2012) Review of maritime transport. (*UNCTAD/RMT/2012*), Geneva.
- University of Ghana website (2013) <http://www.ug.edu.gh/index1.php?linkid=243&sublinkid=72>, retrieved on 12/12/2013

#### Biography

**Felicity Ankoma – Sey, Ghanaian**

**MSc. Maritime Affairs, specializing in Port Management, World Maritime University, Malmo, Sweden (2001).**