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PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AT SEA IN THE LIGHT OF FEMALE SEAFARERS' EXPERIENCE. CHALLENGES FOR MARITIME EDUCATION¹

ABSTRACT

The article presents the ways of perceiving female seafarers that occur among the crews of sea-going vessels. To identify the conceptions of 'being a woman on-board', a phenomenographic research approach was applied. As the result, various ways of perceiving female seafarers were identified. The results of the study may contribute to becoming aware of selected challenges which maritime education faces as well as refining educational practices within this field.

Keywords:

maritime education, female seafarers, employment of women at sea, phenomenography, gender inequalities.

The observation of the structure of working women and men within the maritime economy sector indicates an uneven distribution of the number

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of employees. The efforts undertaken for more than 20 years, focused on the broader inclusion of women in the maritime sector, do not bring satisfactory results, and the representation of females in the maritime industry is still low (Manpower Report, 2015; ILO 2019). The traditional way of viewing the maritime industry picturizes it as a men's domain, which still has a particularly strong influence on women's choices about their professional careers (ITF 2017; Momoko, 2012; Minghua, 1998).

The focus of the study is mainly addressed to the problem of gender discrimination in the maritime industry, especially to one of its forms, which occurs in hidden practices of pre-entry discrimination, and it is involved in the stereotypical perception of women as (potential) seafarers. Pre-entry discrimination takes place when females are denied equal opportunity to enter some occupations and industries, and it involves preconditioning related to differential educational and socialization opportunities (Chiplin, Sloane, 1982). One of the essential elements of such preconditioning pertains to the overwhelming impact of stereotypes referring to the so-called 'male' and 'female' professions. The stereotypes may influence women's choices about the future profession and discourage them from working at sea or from continuing their employment. Some studies show that employers are often reluctant to employ female cadets, or even qualified seafarers, basing on their perception strongly influenced by gender stereotypes (Theotocas & Salichi, 2013; Kite, Deaux, Haines, 2008, pp. 205-236).

Methodological aspects of the study

The aims of the study involve the identification of various ways of perceiving female seafarers (i.e. 'conceptions') that occur within the maritime labour environment and, the same time, are presented/internalized by women themselves. This way of determining the research objectives is a result of applying the phenomenographic approach situated within the field of qualitative research. Phenomenography is qualitative and interpretative research aiming at description of both consciousness and experience of a human, in its relation to an experienced phenomenon. Phenomenography is described as 'the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived, and apprehended' (Marton, 1994, p. 4425). The results of phenomenographic research constitute a set of 'categories of description' in which individuals understand different phenomena in the surrounding world. These ways of understanding,

depicted in terms of conceptions, are 'collective but individually and culturally distributed' (Marton, 1995, p. 171). A vital issue in phenomenography is the ontological status of conceptions, that bases on the assumption on 'experiential, non-dualistic, and internal personal person-world relationship' (Ibidem). Therefore, phenomenographic research aims to identify ways (conceptions) in which people perceive certain phenomena; the words 'experience', 'perceive', 'conceive' are used here interchangeably. The ontological foundations of phenomenography prevent us from defining the object of a study a priori; however, in more general perspective, in the presented study femininity is understood in terms of gender, which is a social construct basing upon culturally defined factors.

The object of the study involves the perspectives on 'women on-board' in the light of female seafarers' experience. It is worth mentioning that a phenomenon itself does not constitute an object of a phenomenographic study, but it refers to various ways of perceiving certain phenomena by subjects. Herein, the interest of a phenomenography focuses on the description of these aspects of consciousness of a group of individuals that relate to experiencing 'being a woman on-board a sea-going vessel'. Thus, forms of human consciousness (i.e., conceptions/perspectives) constitute a proper object of the study. As a result of a phenomenographic study, categories of description were defined. They represent different ways of understanding phenomena of 'being a woman on-board' presented by interviewed individuals.

The dominating method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. As a tool for gathering the data, focus interviews, as well as individual depth-in interviews, were applied. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Twenty female seafarers have been participating in the research. Experiences from phenomenographic studies conducted by other researchers have shown that data from 20 informants are usually sufficient to identify possible ways of understanding a phenomenon. The sampling done for the study was purposeful. The group of informants that took part in the study predominantly consisted of female students of Polish Naval Academy (civilians in their last semesters of Navigation and Mechanical engineering programs). The interviewees already have on-board experience as apprentices on sea going vessels. The research group also included women whose rich professional experience related to occupying officers' positions in the merchant navy. After completing the main part of the study, additional data was obtained to confront the experiences of the female interviewees with an external ('male') perspective. For this purpose the data obtained were presented and comments were requested from several men in officer positions on ships. The

data thus obtained did not fall within the scope of the basic research results, although it constitutes their supplement, to which we refer occasionally.

Results of the study

As a result of the study, various ways in which our informants perceive women occupying a profession related to work at sea were identified. The phenomenographic categories of description include the following conceptions:

1. *A strong woman* striving for being a respected professional;
2. *The fair sex* – a woman as ‘more virtuous gender’;
3. *A gold digger* – a woman ‘looking for a husband’;
4. *Un-naturalized* – a woman alienated from her femininity;
5. A woman on-board as *unprivileged and unwanted*;
6. *An easy make* – a woman easily persuaded to engage in sexual acts;
7. A woman as a *friend*;
8. A woman as a *catalyst for improvement in the crew’s behaviour*.

Ad. 1. A strong woman striving for being a respected professional

In the light of some statements expressed by our interviewees a woman on-board is perceived as strong, diligent person who is wholly determined to become a respected professional. She is ascribed such features as: physical strength, stubbornness, hard work ability, dedication to a professional career. This concept does not refer to the overall vision of a woman on-board but to a minority of selected women endowed with powerful – intrinsic – motivation to work on-board, the strength of character, and the exceptional level of psychological resistance. Below we present selected excerpts, that illustrate the concept of a *strong woman*:

Women are diverse. Some of them will work on-board a ship, and others will not. Only those – who are fully determined to do so – will do.
(A female cadet)

As it was often accentuated by the informants, not many female seafarers have suitable predispositions and can both meet specific demands of their vocational role as well as stay immune to the pressure exerted by the social environment on-board:

You must have the character for it. I do have. And I'm going to work on the sea, and that's why I'm doing the captain's papers now. But I don't think there are many others like me.

(A female chief officer)

In the light of personal or cultural experience of our respondents, this group of women seems to be seriously challenged by prejudices widespread among crews. Therefore, they must continuously prove their professionalism, high level of specific capabilities, and strive for higher achievements. According to a statement expressed by one of the interviewees:

It is a job suitable for women, but it is tough; and the issue is not that it is physically heavy, but that as a woman, I must fight every day and constantly prove that I am fit for the sea.

(A female seafarer)

According to some of our interviewees, a *strong woman* is aware of the obstacles in her way, among which misogynistic attitudes of male crews are the most difficult to cope:

For example, I must make much more effort (than men) to be perceived as a sailor.

(A female apprentice)

Such an agentic and task-oriented attitude of women to catch up, if not exceeding the 'male standards' of performing tasks may be the result of the fact that in masculine domains women are held to a higher standard of performance than men and that their performance is evaluated according to higher criteria than for men (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2016, p. 108).

A *strong woman* on-board must employ elaborated strategies of protecting herself from men's domination being manifested in pointing out the woman her ineptitude and inadequacy to work at sea:

So, I think that women can sail, but not all are fit for it. You must have strong character, and you must try hard. You should never allow (the men) to dominate you; you must not sit in the corner, but you must fight hard.

(A female chief officer)

Achieving the position of a respected professional requires women concealing gender-related personal attributes, especially those which could be perceived by male staff in terms of feminine strategies of seduction:

If she sits down with the guys and treats them normally – just as colleagues, not the objects to pick up – they would quickly understand that she is just a mate of theirs and that they have no problems with the fact that she is a woman.
(Female chief officer)

Ad. 2. The ‘fair sex’ – a woman as ‘more virtuous gender’

The category of woman as ‘fair sex’ refers to the exaggeratedly feminine portrait of females for whom a ship does not deliver a proper environment of living or job performing. *Fair sex discourse* itself, as presented in eighteenth century American and English culture, referred to a woman as ‘more virtuous gender’. The term derives from the Renaissance Era as referring to light skin tone, natural beauty, and moral purity as well as sexuality that must be constrained (Schloesser, 2002). It involves a romanticized portrait of women, accentuating their beauty as well as both mental and physical weakness. The above had to result in sovereignty to a man and domesticity. Similar ways of perceiving women on-board were expressed by our respondents, which seem to both reflect the male view of women at sea as well as depict selected ‘survival strategies’ that unexperienced female seafarers employ in order to deal with work and social relationships at sea. According to our interviewees:

All the time, they emphasize that they are women, but this excuse does not work at sea. (Why?). Because doing so, they harm those who want to work hard. And (...) since there is a negative opinion about women at sea, nobody wants them on-board. At sea, sometimes you must roll up your sleeves and do what other seamen do; you must not cry that since you are female, you are not able to perform your task (...). If you do so – this means that you are not fit for the job. And then the opinion spreads that ‘baba’ (a pejorative term for a woman) is not good enough for working on-board.
(A female cadet)

I was often misjudged by the first sight (by men): ‘Look! A lady came on board; there will be no use of her’.
(A female cadet)

On board ships, we do not have enough people to work, and every working hand is useful. And what if she is reluctant? Or constantly disable? What do I need her for?

(A female chief officer)

In this case, the 'feminine nature' is not only perceived in terms of biology (delicacy of posture, physical weakness, physical attractiveness, etc.) but also in its relation to the social role traditionally assigned to a woman (e.g., as a mother or wife). In this context, the following statements were expressed:

This is not a job for women. Many of them begin to work on-board knowing that they will continue until giving birth to a first child; after that, they will not return to the ship.

Who is going to bring the children up?

(Female seafarers)

The above statements seem to reflect opinions popular in the society, that were only reported, however not shared, by our respondents. What is more, these opinions – as represented among broader society – were perceived by the interviewees as weakening the professional status of female seafarers and discouraging them from continuing work on-board. In this sense, the vision of females as 'fair sex' seems embodied in benevolent forms of sexism which include reverence of women in family life and child caretaker roles, a romanticized portrait of women as objects of heterosexual affection as well as picturizing them as dependant on men's support. However positive and non-harmful it may seem, benevolent sexism restricts economic and social opportunities of women (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Ad. 3. A gold digger – a woman 'looking for a husband'

The concept of a gold digger involves an opinion about women on-board presented both by female and male seafarers. As it was expressed by one of the informants:

They are going to pick up a guy at sea. Moreover, they cause problems for other women because when the crew meets such a doll, they will form an opinion about all women who want to work (on-board) and, possibly, one day could become good sailors.

(A female chief officer)

Some women are accused of abusing seamen financially:

Well, when she realized that her extra money from the sailor had stopped, she abandoned him and started to look for another scapegoat.

(A female chief officer)

Such a perspective on women could be regarded as a tool for maintaining men's domination through intimidating female seafarers with questions about their marriage status and insinuating 'gold-digging practices'. One of our respondents delivers an example of an embarrassing situation: male seafarers, gathered in a group, were questioning her: 'Why are you still single?' Another informant reports: *I have always been asked: 'Are you married?', 'Are you declared?', 'Why not?', 'Maybe you are looking for a husband on-board a ship.'*

Ad. 4. Un-naturalised – a woman alienated from her femininity

In perspective given by our respondents, work on-board alienates women from her 'feminine' nature. Un-naturalised woman acts in a stereotypically masculine, that is, agentic fashion, as well as she is deprived of physical attractiveness. Some of female seafarers tend to imitate male role-models, which seem to make them 'gender invisible':

It does not bother me that I work with guys usually. I am stubborn, I have my opinions, and I could argue with every guy about being right. My colleagues say about me: 'You have balls'. And I'm perceived to be like a guy. Such a 'babochłop' (in Polish: a male-female hybrid). Do you know that I even hunt? This impressed my colleagues, especially when I told them how to shoot a boar.

(A female chief officer)

They know that I'm not a sweet blonde but that I can roll up my sleeves and work hard. If needed, I can lift a huge chest, I can throw with a rope (...).

(A female chief officer)

It seems that for some female seafarers the strategy of assuming the masculine pattern of performance is used as a strategy for elevating their status in male-dominated environment. However, some studies indicate that the effectiveness of this strategy is limited (Eagly et al., 1992).

Ad. 5. A woman on-board as *unprivileged and unwanted*

As it was reported by our interviewees, women occupied an unprivileged position in the maritime work environment, typically perceived as masculine domain. In this context, they referred to limited access to positions of crew members on sea-going vessels. They also indicated problems with finding maritime apprenticeship, which are commonly encountered by female cadets. It is worth noticing that completing a maritime apprenticeship is not only a form of professional training but also a prerequisite for graduation from maritime academy due to standards of IMO (International Maritime Organization). Factors that decide about the difficulties in taking up or completing apprenticeships are comprehensive and include:

- gender stereotypes (including the vision of woman as ‘*fair sex*’ who is unfit for work at sea);
- shortage of space on-board and inability to provide female apprentices with a separate living cabin;
- problems with finding a position by unqualified staff (trainees or young cadets whose qualifications do not meet the formal standards).

In result: when candidates for maritime apprenticeship are selected, women’s applications are rejected immediately. Such practices indicate the existence of elements of horizontal occupational segregation in the recruitment process based on the gender criterion. As it was expressed by the interviewees:

From ship-owners and crewing companies, you always hear ‘no’, because it is hard physical work, and ‘we are looking for men. You are not fit for it’.

(A female cadet)

They have told me ‘no’ because they had problems with a separate cabin for me and with other social facilities. But I did not expect any special considerations.

(A female cadet)

The unprivileged position of women in the maritime industry seems to be related to a defensive attitude of men standing on guard of their last ‘exclusive territories’. The above was clearly expressed by a male captain:

Baby (pejoratively about women) at sea? Have you ever heard that a woman at sea bring misfortune? And I do believe this! I even have an appeal: leave us the space of the ship and this profession. Do not enter there! It's male asylum!

Which could be particularly interesting from a perspective of post-colonial discourse, there also female seafarers who tend to protect male territories. A female officer aspiring to a position of a captain claims:

I know that I will never let any baba to get on board my ship!

From a perspective given by some informants, women at sea sometimes play the role of a victim of political correctness, which does not give them a chance for valuable professional activity. According to the western democratic standards of gender equality, respected by many shipping companies, officially there are no barriers involved in employment policy that could relate to sex and gender. However, as some of the informants claim, sometimes artificial rules of 'political correctness', not followed by cultural practices of gender equity, play the role of the only motive for accepting women on board:

I guess they did not want me on board, and somewhat on the principle of such (political) correctness, they wanted to show that they have a female apprentice.

(A female cadet)

It's like in the ZOO - in many crews, these women are just for show only. They are an unusual 'phenomenon', and they are treated as such. This happened to a (female) apprentice in the engine room. It was the first time for the (male) crew to have a woman there, and they didn't know what to do with her. Hopeless situation.

(A female cadet)

In the first company, I felt invisible. According to the official policy (of the company), there was a female trainee needed. However, they were so afraid that they did not assign any work to me; they were afraid of having contact with me. I was like a leper.

(A female seafarer)

One of the interviewees referred to a condition of social isolation, which she fell prey of as a consequence of 'political correctness':

The male crew was so afraid of accusations of sexual harassment. For example, they never entered the elevator while I was inside (...). They were just afraid.
(A female seafarer)

Some respondents indicate that the unprivileged position of women on-board makes them dependant on men, which could result in humiliating forms of acquiring men's protection:

Colleagues told him that such ladies working at sea are an excellent sexual product – it happens that men support them as less experienced friends, and then they have sex with them, of course.
(A female apprentice)

Sometimes the unprivileged status of women on-board places them in a position of victims of mobbing which could assume forms of ridiculing, gossiping or undeserved severe critics. A female cadet reports on her apprenticeship experience as follows:

It was mobbing. I had a captain who humiliated me, ridiculed me, pushed me away from assigned duties for no apparent reason, and did everything in public, in front of other officers. This was a nightmare. (...) In the end, I could not stand it, and my health started to collapse. (...). Finally, I abandoned the ship.

Gossiping and criticizing are perceived as both: forms of mobbing and strategy of maintaining men's domination through pushing women back to 'their' traditional territories: family life and typical female occupations. Here-in we deal with hostile form of sexism which is manifested in openly antagonistic attitudes towards women (Glick et al., 2000).

Ad. 6. An 'easy make' – a women easily persuaded to engage in the sexual acts

According to some of the interviewees, female seafarers are attributed with sexual promiscuity. Such an opinion is widespread within a broader society, and sometimes it is shared by partners or potential partners of female seafarers:

Well, because if a man has no clue about working on-board, he thinks that a woman on-board is always open to relations with seamen.
(A female cadet)

Thus, female seafarers or cadets do not feel accepted as potential partners or wives. Women who, after a period of apprenticeship or working on-board a ship, chose to get involved in steady relationships or get married, feel pressured to decide between their professional career at sea and starting a family life.

Beliefs about women's sexual promiscuity seem common among ship crews and are also infused by women. A female chief officer, who seemed to present a misogynist attitude towards other female seafarers, expressed the following opinion:

As we usually have such five-month contracts, and not always go down to the port or do not want to catch something in this port, you know, such venereal revelations, then such a lady on-board, who is still at hand, seems useful.

Once again, we deal here with hostile sexism which involves negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, such as beliefs that women are sexually manipulative (Glick&Fiske, 1993).

Ad. 7. A woman as a friend

This concept, which seems to play a marginal role in the global results of the research, refers to a unique experience of face-to-face contact between two human beings, where a woman is not perceived by the perspective given by its gender role:

Because when I am alone on the bridge with another sailor, I often want to talk. Just normally. Then I assume the role of a woman-confessor. (...) I want to give support and advice, and it's ok.

Maintaining this kind of relation between female and male seafarers, which bases on equality, sincerity, and openness, requires an intimate context:

But if he is together with other guys, a sudden change occurs. In the group, I am no longer welcome and certainly not as a confessor.
(A female cadet)

Ad. 8. A woman as a *catalyst for improvement in crew's behaviour*

Some female seafarers, and some male as well, claim that a woman soothes manners within the male crew:

The captain said it was good that he had a woman in the crew because the everyday culture had improved!

(A female seafarer)

I even noticed that it was better to have ladies in the crew. Ladies improve manners. Seafarers try their best, and even hygiene is better. And they shave more often and look better. (...) Language improves! We talk more about family and children. There is more smile and politeness around. I like it.

(A male captain – supplementary data)

Conclusions

Summing up the results of the conducted analyses, it is worth noting that the mental climate of work at sea does not create an incentive for women to undertake or continue it. The identified ways of perceiving women working on board sea-going vessels involve gender stereotypes, contributing to discriminatory practices against women. The function of these stereotypes mostly refers to hostile sexism which seeks to exclude women from domains (and professions) considered typically male. They reflect predominant patriarchal model of society, leading to maintaining a restrictive types of gender roles and hierarchical relations between males and females, where women are dominated by men (Bourdieu, 2001; Nussbaum, 1999). Common knowledge and gender stereotypes as well as everyday life experience constitute the maritime environment as a space of informal learning of significant importance, as Knowles (1990) noticed in relation to the domain of everyday culture. On the ship as a workplace, women learn strategies to overcome or avoid male supremacy. Some of them will resign, reaching the dominant (in maritime culture) belief that this is not a profession for women. Others will adopt different strategies of survival, adopting a hyper-men pattern of performing a professional role, or identifying with the romantic vision of a *fair lady*, will be focused on seeking male protection. In this sense, gender has power over relations in work environment which constitutes educational environment *per se*; the latter is particularly noticeable within the practices of entering professional roles, which is associated with constructing and conditioning of education and learning (Dyb-

broe & Ollagnier, 2003). This constitutes a significant challenge for education preparing for professional roles within areas of gender bias, traditionally ascribed to men, such as profession of a sailor. Paradoxically, this challenge refers not only to education of women, but above all – to men's.

The challenge we discuss refers mostly to gender-sensitive education, with its core in recognition of human diversity. This requires integrating gender issues within the range of adult education (Ostrouch-Kamińska & Vieira, 2016). So far, we have been dealing with an acute lack of gender issues within the field of academic education preparing for the profession of a seafarer – we have so far to cope with the phenomenon described in terms of null curriculum. The null curriculum relates to 'the perspectives [the students] may never know about'; 'the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire' (Eisner, 1985, p. 107). This concept refers to formal and non-formal contexts of adult learning, which fail its role in offering content which is crucial for fulfilling social and vocational roles. These empty places in existing seafarer education programs seem to be silent through cultural and social mechanisms of generating inequalities between women and men in various domains: employment sectors, educational settings, and the whole society.

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POSTRZEGANIE KOBIEŃ W ZAWODACH MORSKICH W ŚWIETLE DOŚWIADCZEŃ KOBIEŃ-MARYNARZY. WYZWANIA DLA EDUKACJI MORSKIEJ

SRESZCZENIE

Artykuł ukazuje sposoby postrzegania kobiet-marynarzy będących członkiniami załóg statków morskich. W celu identyfikacji koncepcji „bycia kobietą na pokładzie”, zastosowano fenomenograficzne podejście badawcze. W rezultacie autorki zidentyfikowały różne sposoby postrzegania kobiet-marynarzy. Wyniki badania mogą przyczynić się do uświadomienia wybranych wyzwań stojących przed edukacją morską, a także udoskonalić praktyki edukacyjne w tym zakresie.

Słowa kluczowe:

edukacja morską, kobiety-marynarze, zatrudnienie kobiet na morzu, fenomenografia, nierówności dotyczące płci kulturowej.