

The Necessity of Establishing a National Organization to Monitor and Enhance Women's Employability in the Water Transportation Sector

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ABSTRACT: The maritime transport industry is one of the most critical tradeways worldwide and has traditionally been a male stronghold, even as more and more women are admitted. Just as in many countries, including Bulgaria, the share of women in the maritime industry is always considerably less than that of men, exacerbated by the absence of any institutional framework specifically oriented toward gender issues in this sector. The article discusses the reasons for the need to create a public agency in Bulgaria that is concerned with monitoring women's participation in the maritime transport sector. The study examines the challenges that women face in this field, such as discrimination, prejudices, and lack of institutional support. The study combines a holistic approach toward national bodies for gender equality in the maritime sector with empirical and qualitative analyses of the responses of 136 women actively engaged in water-based transportation in Bulgaria, including professionals and students from the maritime departments at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy. The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the potential role of such a national body in addressing the outlined issues and enhancing proposals for improving women's representation, employment, and career prospects in the maritime transport sector.

1 INTRODUCTION

The maritime activities include shipping, inland waterways, ports, ferry passenger services, supporting activities such as maritime logistics, and all tourism-related aquaculture and naval-based operations. No specific data on women employed in the aquatic transport industry in Bulgaria is available until 2024, emphasizing the significant gap. The lack of detailed and current information about women's representation and participation in the sector serves as a barrier to understanding the real scope of gender disparities and areas in need of intervention. The design of focused policies that would remove impediments women face in the sector of maritime-based activities is practically impossible without the relevant statistics. The lack of data, and the non-existence of specific institutions for

this purpose, hinders the definition of measures that are necessary to push for measures that promote gender equality, diversity and the improvement of the position of women in the labor market, and their professional progress in the sector.

The aim of this study is to assess the necessity of forming a national body to monitor the participation of women in the seafaring industry and the increase of women employment level in this branch of the maritime industry in Bulgaria.

Methodology: The study combines an in-depth review of the existing national institutions related to gender equality in the maritime industry and primary data obtained from a survey of women engaged in water-based transportation in Bulgaria and studying maritime specialties at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval

Academy. The survey sought more information from the women regarding the challenges they face due to gender dynamics in the sector and what support systems they think are needed to enhance their participation in the industry and realize their careers.

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the possible role of a national organization in addressing these issues and recommendations for improving women's representation, employability, and career advancement within the water transportation sector, leading to a more balanced and dynamic industry.

2 INSTITUTIONAL GAPS AND THE NEED FOR SECTOR-SPECIFIC GENDER EQUALITY IN BULGARIA'S MARITIME TRANSPORT INDUSTRY

Bulgaria improved in the broader aspect of gender equality according to the Gender Equality Index, with a score increase of 6.3 points by 2023 from 2019 (EUGE 2023). Still, as of 2019, it was below the EU-27 average in most dimensions, including economic participation and opportunity [28]. Low levels prevail worldwide concerning women's participation in the transport sector; they only account for 12% of the workers in transportation and storage subsectors [27]. The International Maritime Organization and the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association are surveying for the first time internationally to ascertain the baseline data of the number and status of women in the maritime and ocean sectors, respectively. The survey is anticipated to capture a wealth of information regarding the role of women in the maritime industry [11]. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality [7]) the percentage of women workers within the extended transport category, including maritime, is around 19%. Moreover, the European Transport Workers' Federation [8] is committed to increasing the participation of women in the port and inland navigation sector and enhancing working conditions.

This data suggests that some of the existing Bulgarian institutions track women's employment at the national level and have mechanisms through which these levels are discussed and addressed. However, none is focused on the water-based transport sector [1]. While the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy [14] is very instrumental in ensuring that there is a gender perspective in the labor market in different areas, including water transport, the challenges provided are general and do not highlight the specific problems that women encounter concerning labor in the water-based sector. Similarly, the National Statistical Institute [18] collects data on the general employment trends by branches; it does not present special information about the water transportation branch that would restrict the more specific understanding of women's participation. Also, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination plays a central role in the action plan. Its scope is related to all the fields and does not concentrate specifically on the gender disparities in water-based employment. The Maritime Administration Executive Agency [9], concerning the exercise of its powers on maritime affairs, pays special attention to issues of maritime safety and pollution

from a gender perspective. Industrial Capital Association-Bulgaria [4] is the organization that initiated the campaign to encourage women's involvement in different sectors. Still, it does not include specific actions in aquatic transport and creates a general momentum. Immediate positive effects on equal opportunities in the aquatic industry will be felt by some EU projects for women in the maritime sectors, including Bulgaria in WINBLUE, WIN-BIG, and SHE4SEA. For instance, under an analysis of female interest in maritime education, the Naval Academy "N. Y. Vaptsarov" will propose specific measures to motivate more girls to choose this type of education and develop a maritime career [2, 6].

These institutions and projects have immense value for gender mainstreaming and promoting women in the labor market but do not ensure the specialized focus for mitigating the challenges and specific barriers to women in Bulgaria's water transportation sector [10]. The absence of such institutions focusing on improving women's employment, employability, and advancement in water-related professions does not allow an integrated approach to address gender inequality. Therefore, there is a need for an institution or organization specifically focused on monitoring and addressing gender disparities in the maritime transport sector to offer a more targeted and practical approach to enhancing women's participation and advancement in this critical industry.

3 SURVEY INSIGHTS INTO GENDER-BASED CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR WOMEN IN BULGARIA'S MARITIME SECTOR

To advance the research and deepen the knowledge on this topic, our study reports the results of a survey responded to by 136 women who are presently involved in the maritime profession in Bulgaria. It covers the students and specialists at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy [15,17]. As per the respondents, who comprised 64% females and 34% males, their educational status reflected 47% pursuing studies at the university level, 34% having a bachelor's degree, and 19% holding a master's or higher degree. This data is believed to be sufficiently informative regarding the challenges of women, their views on the gender factor within the industry, and what support measures are necessary to enhance the involvement and careers of women in the maritime sector.

The first question (Figure 1) aims to identify and frame the main challenges and stereotypes facing women in the water-based industry:

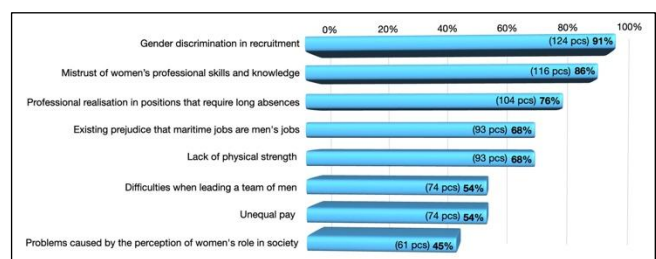


Figure 1. Proportional breakdown of responses to the question "What are the biggest challenges and stereotypes that women face in the water-based industry?"

The most commonly perceived challenge for the respondents (91%) was gender discrimination in recruitment. This finding indicates that, despite progress in gender equity, numerous women still lack employment opportunities in the water sector. The high weight placed on this issue underlines that one-tracked gender stereotypes and judgments are present in recruitment and that they are potentially preventing women's opportunities within the sector. The second biggest obstacle (consistently identified by 86% of respondents) is suspicion of women's expertise and ability. This is a stereotype of women being unskilled or incapable of doing the necessary jobs in the water-based industry in comparison with men. This stereotype prevents women from attaining senior-level or specialized roles and skill development opportunities. The major challenge women encounter in the water-based sector is professional realization in roles that demand long absences from home. Because 76% of the respondents raised this as a concern, it implies that most women do not want or cannot take up the challenge of assuming roles that will require them to be away from their families and personal lives because of other social expectations around caregiving and family responsibilities. This challenge could also have an impact on women's career advancement especially in maritime shipping where long voyages or tours on offshore vessels are the norm. Furthermore, 68% of the respondents believe that "Jobs in the water are men's jobs, ". This is another stereotype. These beliefs help to project that gender-based stereotype into many fields which seriously discourages thinking about or even pursuing careers by females while promoting tendency of the job sector to become exclusive. These biases cement the belief that women are unequipped for such positions, thereby more distinctly outlining gender disparities within the industry. Likewise, 68% of the people indicated the stereotype of women's lack of physical strength in some roles in the water-based industry. This typical gender stereotype is rooted in traditional assumptions about physical abilities. While specific work roles might be based on physical strength, such stereotypes do not recognize the variety of women's skills and competencies in this sector, limiting their professional options. Half of the respondents (54%) highlighted the significant challenge of unequal pay prevailing in the sector. There has long been a gender pay gap in most sectors, and the water sector is no better placed. Within the sector, women may be paid less than men for the same or similar work, thus deepening inequality. This sort of issue would also lower the morale of women working in that sector and decrease job satisfaction, therefore attracting women to stay away from building careers in that sector. The role of women is also seen as a challenge from society's perception, as indicated by 45% of the respondents. This implies that there is a heavier burden placed by general cultural and social expectations on women, with family and care centre in by a factor over and above men. Social and cultural expectations that women conform to historical gender norms can also influence a woman's career choice and progression in the water-borne sector.

Leading a team of male employees is considered challenging by 54% of the respondents. Female leaders may have more challenges establishing relationships with their male colleagues to earn respect, acceptability, and trust. Gender biases and stereotypes

related to leadership can harm the leadership skills of women and create attitudinal working conditions against those where women are considered less effective or incompetent leaders in organizations, particularly in the male-dominated water-based sector.

The survey results reveal complex challenges and stereotypes women face in the maritime sector, ranging from recruitment bias to leadership barriers. The most common issues include gender discrimination, doubts about the professional skills of women, and social pressures relating to caregiving roles, which could significantly impact the full participation of women in the sector. These challenges are reinforced by the fact that certain jobs are intrinsically male-dominated and, further, by the stereotype regarding female strength or, rather, the perception of female weakness in those roles. Addressing these issues will require comprehensive efforts from industry stakeholders and policymakers to create a more inclusive, equitable, and supportive environment for women in the water-based transport industry.

To gain deeper insights into the resources women utilize for support and guidance, the study presents the following question (Figure 2):

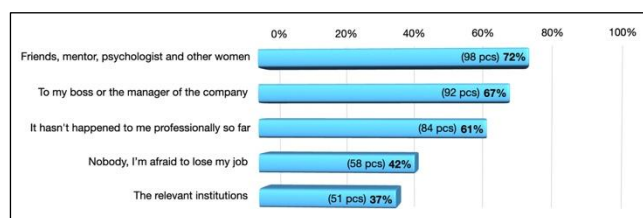


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of responses to the question "If you are a woman experiencing discrimination, prejudice, or gender-related issues in the workplace, whom do you turn to for support? / If you are a man witnessing such situations affecting a female colleague within your team, whom do you approach for support?"

The findings relating to this question add to our understanding of the support sources to which women at work will go in the event of experiences of gender-related problems or discrimination and potential obstacles to seeking support. The fact that such a high percentage of respondents (72%) also rely on informal support channels such as friends, mentors, and psychologists could indicate that women are most comfortable seeking personal, confidential support for both emotional and professional support. This observation confirms the lack of a specific formal institution or support system dedicated explicitly to addressing gender-related issues in the workplace. In the lack of such institutional arrangements, the respondents may have to fall back on their immediate social contacts, which, though well-meaning, may not be able to provide the necessary professional or legal recourse that can more effectively emanate from institutionalized organizational channels. The findings also highlight the value (particularly by women) of solidarity in facing common gender-related challenges. A large majority of the participants (67%) equally prefer seeking help from their direct supervisors or managers. Though this is not what most would typically do, it suggests that employees may not feel very comfortable approaching an authority figure, dully conscious of the power dynamic, or for want of building adequate trust or even for fear of possible

retribution. This speaks to the fact that there is a greater need for strong organizational support and specific policies that encourage employees to report discrimination without the fear of reprisal.

A large proportion of the respondents, 61%, have had no personal experience of gender-related problems or discrimination at work. This may be taken as a positive sign. On the other hand, such incidents are woefully underreported since the respondents do not feel the gravity of the situation warrants recognition or any other reason. Secondly, the outcome may also be swayed because the survey included male respondents, who might not have faced or noticed such gender-based challenges in their professional settings. The results also relate to a general trend in society to underestimate subtle gender issues, particularly in sectors where men are the primary workforce. Upwards of 42% of the respondents have fears of job loss, which solidifies the systemic magnitude of the fear that a large population has regarding reporting any form of discrimination or gender-based issues. This argues for more job protection on an institutional basis so that employees have a shield when speaking up on such matters. A low percentage, 37%, turn to the formal institutions. This shows they do not trust or know much about the help system. It also shows a possible gap in knowledge about the laws or groups set up to help fight discrimination. This, in turn, stops women from seeking legal help when they face gender problems.

Results demonstrate a combination of informal and formal support systems, with respondents articulating that women mainly depend on informal aspects expressed by personal networks and mentors. The high fear of retaliation (42%) and low uptake of the facilities (37%) indicates that though informal support is necessary, there must be greater institutionalization with an expedited reporting channel, legal protection, and awareness education on the available resources. This finding underscores the importance of creating organizational and national structures that are trusted and accessible to individuals who face discrimination in the workplace.

4 SURVEY-BASED SUPPORT FOR A GENDER EQUALITY BODY IN BULGARIA'S WATER TRANSPORT SECTOR

This part of the study aims to reveal the views of the respondents concerning the need to establish a national institution for monitoring and improving the status and participation of Bulgarian women in the maritime sector. To confirm this, respondents were requested if they think the organization is necessary for the interest of combating gender discrimination and improving job opportunities in the field (Figure 3). In this topic we explore their responses and discuss what is valued in terms of the need for institutional support and the priorities for such a body in terms of priority and priorities of concern, which include career development, educational partnership and addressing inequality in the workplace.

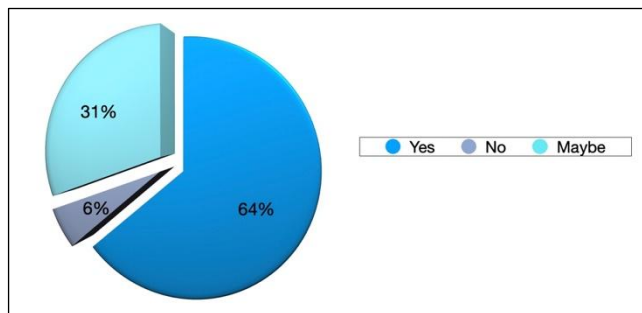


Figure 3. Distribution of responses by percentage to the question, "Do you believe it is essential to establish a national institution in Bulgaria to monitor women's participation in the maritime industry, tackle discrimination, and enhance their employability?"

A majority of 64 % of the respondents believe that there is a need for a national body in Bulgaria that focuses on the participation of women in the maritime sector to deal with issues of discrimination and increase employability. And that, quite simply, is evidence of the dire need this institutionalized capability has to work and see equality eliminate within the industry. Just under a third of the recipients, 31 percent, answered "Maybe" - meaning that the recipients have become sold on the idea but are not sure if it really would work in this way. It could also indicate a requirement for further information regarding the benefits and structure of such an organization. A small minority, 6%, who said "No" believe such an institution is unnecessary. This could mean the existing frameworks are undesirable or lack awareness of women's challenges in the maritime industry. However, this minority reaction makes clear we need more advocacy and education. Respondents are positive to the creation of an organisation for gender issues to cover maritime notice and a high proportion of respondents would be prepared to further consider this matter.

To provide some insight on how the participants themselves perceived the concept of such a possible organization, as well as its main objectives, the question: "What should be the primary priorities of a national organization aimed at enhancing women's participation, professional development, and ensuring discrimination-free security in the water transportation sector?" (Figure 4):

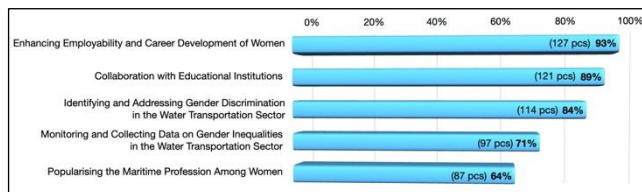


Figure 4. Breakdown of responses by percentage for the question "What should be the primary priorities of a national organization to enhance women's participation, professional development, and ensure discrimination-free security in the water transportation sector?"

The survey results underscore the main priorities of a potential organization that would advance and increase female participation in the maritime sector. The priority was Enhancing Employability and Career Development for women, plus 93% of the respondents; therefore, this idea was already being formed vigorously. This indicates a clear perception of the

urgent need for support systems to enhance women's prospects, skills, and total participation in the leadership and technical arms of the sector. Partnership with Educational Institutions ranked second at 89%, indicating that the respondents highly value strong links between the organization and educational institutions. This should raise the curricula on gender sensitivity and other related matters to foster an encompassing learning environment. The urgency of any organization responding to gender-based challenges can effectively be encapsulated in the title Identifying and Addressing Gender Discrimination in the Maritime Sector. It is the formal realization of the fact that women in the water-based industry continue to face barriers existing due to stereotypes, prejudice, and unequal opportunity. Therefore, an effective organization shall provide advocacy, support, and policies for reducing discrimination and ensuring an equitable work environment. Monitoring and Collecting Data on Gender Inequalities in the Water Transportation Sector (72%) reflects an approach that is not as strongly prioritized as the other tasks. However, it places an implicit mandate on collecting data to monitor the intervention's progress and the areas where further action is needed. Setting up sound systems for data collection would place the organization at a better vantage point to appreciate the magnitude and nature of the gender gap with specific ways to target improvement. Popularizing the Maritime Profession Among Women (64%) emerges as a somewhat lower priority, yet still significant. The result suggests that while there is a recognition of the need to increase female participation in the aquatic sector, respondents see this as a secondary objective to addressing immediate issues like discrimination, career development, and educational partnerships.

The data suggests that respondents strongly believe the organization should empower women professionally and academically while addressing existing discrimination. There is clear support for an initiative that collaborates with educational institutions and systematically tracks gender inequality in the sector. However, the need to popularize the profession among women is seen as a relatively lesser priority than more immediate challenges like employability and gender equality.

Results analysis proves the need for setting up an organization responsible for monitoring and improving female participation and employability in the water-based transport sector in Bulgaria. This is to actively combat discrimination and increase representation while enhancing career development within the industry.

5 INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN AND STRATEGIC PLACEMENT OF A GENDER EQUALITY ORGANIZATION IN BULGARIA'S MARITIME SECTOR

This chapter outlines the key considerations for the establishment and placement of a national organization that would promote women's participation in the maritime sector. It is to be located based on practical factors, such as proximity to the maritime and educational institutions, access to government bodies, visibility, and nationwide

accessibility, ensuring the organization's effectiveness and impact:

- Strategic Location for Maximum Impact
The organization's location is essential in ensuring its effectiveness, accessibility, and potential to achieve its objectives. It should be strategically placed to optimize its outreach to the central maritime institutions, industry stakeholders, and government bodies. This should also ensure broad participation from females in the sector across Bulgaria.
- Proximity to Key Maritime Institutions
One of the primary criteria for determining the organization's location is its proximity to major maritime hubs such as ports, naval academies, and related government institutions [23, 29]. Therefore, this organization should be located within or around cities with significant maritime infrastructure and a good working relationship with the industry leaders and all other stakeholders, including the port administration. Having a considerable port and maritime infrastructure, Varna, and for that reason, Burgas, another major port city, is suitable for hosting the organization because these cities will make the maritime sector directly accessible for them in terms of interaction available with the policymakers and academics.
- Collaboration with Educational Institutions
The core priority of the organization is to foster collaboration with educational institutions, especially those related to maritime studies. The results obtained from the survey proved that collaboration with academic institutions is essential for supporting the education and employment of women in the field of aquatic transport. Since Varna hosts the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy, a significant player in maritime education, it would be advantageous for the organization to be placed near this institution. This would enable the organization to interact directly with students, teachers, and researchers and create a dynamic environment where they can work together to improve gender equality within the sector.
- Access to Governmental Bodies
To facilitate the process of gaining access to governmental bodies, there is a need for close coordination with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the National Statistical Institute, and the Executive Agency Maritime Administration. This can be achieved by establishing the office in Sofia, Bulgaria, for better communication, policy alignment, and closer advocacy efforts because most of the government offices are based there, and it is of paramount importance for regulatory discussions, policymaking, and liaising with national authorities. While located in a maritime city, the organization's seat should be in Sofia. The choice is based on the imperative need of a town through which they can easily interact with the various government offices to enhance the organization's advocacy and lobbying activities.
- Visibility and Advocacy
The Organization shall, through visibility, demonstrate its efforts to sensitize and advocate for gender issues in the water transport sector. To maximize its impact, the organization should be located in a city with a significant media presence, such as Sofia. This will give the organization a

broader platform to share its message and advocate for policy changes in a media-rich environment. This will attract much-needed public support and create awareness regarding the maritime profession and among women.

- Central Accessibility for All Women in the Sector
The association's office has to be in a central location so that women from all parts of Bulgaria can easily come to it, participate in the work and events, and benefit from the help programs. A central office makes travel and joining easy, ensuring the organization is not limited to a particular area and can help women in maritime and other water-based transport jobs nationwide.

Based on these considerations, the ideal location for the proposed organization should be in one of Bulgaria's key port cities, such as Varna or Burgas. These locations would also enable the direct engagement of the maritime industry, access to leading educational institutions, and engagement of all industry stakeholders. The organization should also retain a presence in Sofia to engage governmental agencies and boost advocacy. This two-site model would allow the organization to maximize reach and impact on the gender infractions and challenges within the water-based transport sector. Setting up the organization in an optimum location will assist it in closely and strategically supporting, monitoring, and expanding the participation of women in the industry and so continue to push for significant change in the direction of gender equality for women in the water-based transport industries and enhanced opportunities for a career for women. By implementing such measures, Bulgaria can move towards narrowing the gender gap in its aquatic sector, leading to a more equitable and diverse industry.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to assess the need of setting a national entity in Bulgaria to support and improve women employability in the maritime transportation domain. However, the study revealed a central institutional blindness to gender inequality in this area, despite wider national-level and EU-driven initiatives to address gender equality.

Additionally, the findings from an assessment of 136 women enrolled in or active in the maritime industry suggest that participants faced numerous obstacles to become involved and succeed within the industry, such as gender stereotypes, discriminatory recruiting practices, unequal compensation, and limited institutional support. The absence of institutions addressing the particular challenges faced by women working in waterborne transport which adds to the severity of the problems described.

Respondents were also very supportive to the establishment of a National Institution: Unambiguous priorities were given to career development, networking with educational institutions, addressing discrimination and visibility. The report also provides strategic recommendations to set up and locate the body so that it is effective, accessible, and capable of influencing policy.

In short, the study finds that an established institution is a crucial step towards systemic shift, mechanisms in a place with a focused, coordinated and sustainable attention to women in maritime in Bulgaria that will be part of a more equal and diverse industry.

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