

Conditions of Women Seafarers in Japan: From the Viewpoint of the International and Domestic Shipping Industry

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Abstract-*There is no denying that since early times the sea has been regarded as a male domain. To tell the truth, I don't think so, but for reasons I will mention later. For example, the Age of Discovery, which could be considered as the first globalization movement, was brought by male adventurers and explorers, and after that, generally speaking, crews of ships of exploration, merchant ships, and warships were always men. However, recent studies have shown that a surprising number of women went to sea. These facts suggest that the impression that the sea, or ships were a masculine domain must be a gender stereotype. But, we cannot deny that women seafarers, as officers as well as ratings are very few in number in Japan, as compared with the number in Europe. For example, it was not until 2009 that we had a female captain of a merchant ship in domestic shipping, not of a cruise ship or a ferry. Until then, there was no female captain of a merchant ship in Japan. Unfortunately, Japan does not yet have any female captains in the international shipping world. This means that Japan is lagging behind European countries in terms of feminization of seafarers. This paper shows the present conditions of feminization of seafarers in Japan, as well as the circumstances of the shipping world in Japan. And it analyzes the reasons why the number of women seafarers is small.*

1. LITERATURE REVIEW~WOMEN SEAFARERS IN HISTORY

For centuries, maritime history has treated seafaring as a male domain. Although a few women have been recorded as having travelled as stewardesses, explorers or as companions to captains, on the whole women did not take part in the actual running of ships. It was not until the steamship era around 1900 that women began to be systematically recruited as crew members aboard passenger ships. There are other cases of women having served during the Second World War, mainly as radio officers aboard Allied ship. The former Soviet Union is an extraordinary anomaly. Reportedly, as many as 8,000 women served on the country's ocean-going merchant vessels and 21,000 on vessels employed in inland navigation during the Second World War[1]. These women may have been exceptional, but they also showed what women could do when given the chance.

It was not until the post-1945 period that women began to appear regularly as crew members aboard cargo ships, most often on Swedish ships as stewardesses, cooks, and radio officers[2]. Moreover, at about the same time, Chinese women seafarers crewed the world's first women-officer-only cargo ship, the *Fengtao*, which traded in international waters[3]. From the mid-1980s and for a period of about 15 years, the shipping world lost interest in recruiting women. It was around in 1990 that again women recruited as seafarers, because the industry began to experience serious difficulty in recruiting men as seafarers. So since the late 1990s, there has been a growing interest in training and recruiting women seafarers, which was largely connected to perceived shortages of officers in the world fleets[4]. As a resolution to this, the IMO (International Maritime Organization) produced a strategy for integrating women into the maritime sector in 1988, whose purpose was a concentration on equal access to maritime training through both mainstream programs and gender-specific project. One of the immediate impacts of this program has been the rise in the percentage of women students made up less than 8 per cent of the total number of students at the World Maritime University in Sweden. However, unfortunately this trend could not be regarded as a general settlement. After that, the IMO produced some programs for recruiting women in maritime sector, but overall, the participation rate of women in seafaring remains low. It has been estimated that women represent only 1 to 2 per cent of the world's 1.25 million seafarers and that most of these women are from developed countries. Among a group of eight European countries (Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom), the average proportion of women in the total seafaring workplace was found to be 9.15 per cent, although the relatively high numbers of Swedish and Danish women and the very low numbers of Italian women seafarers seriously distort this average[5].

2. ANALYSIS OF WOMEN SEAFARERS' CONDITIONS IN SHIPPING INDUSTRIES IN JAPAN

Next, I consider a situation of shipping companies' attitude towards women seafarers in Japan. I examine the policies of some companies which determine the shape and character of the labour market for seafarers.

Unfortunately shipping company in general do not have specific policies relating to women seafarers. There are no policies against employment, but in some countries ship owners can tend to be very negative regarding employing women at sea. This is more evident with shipowners that have never employed female staff before. In some cases, distinctions are made between what is considered appropriate for women seafarers, with some shipowners indicating a few posts where they would never employ women, such as bosun or chief engineer. However, shipowners used to employing women at sea, irrespective of the positions they hold, have, in general, no complaints. Indeed, many of them highlighted the fact that women seafarers can be extremely hard workers. Most cruise companies have sexual harassment policies, although they are not specifically designed to address women seafarers. In most cases, cargo companies have no such policies in place. pregnancy and maternity leave are, in general, non-exist.

Moreover I carried out a survey with about one hundred domestic shipping companies in Japan last year. This survey was conducted to investigate several difficult problems regarding the employment of women seafarers with these companies. The research method was my giving the companies a questionnaire on a visiting survey and a follow-up interview by telephone. All the data were analysed, but company names should not be identified, at their requests.

There are over three thousand domestic shipping companies in Japan, most of which are tiny businesses. Among the companies I examined, only five employed women as seafarers, but one of them has women seafarers just as deck officers, which is a company rule. Most companies, except these five, are unwilling to hire women seafarers.

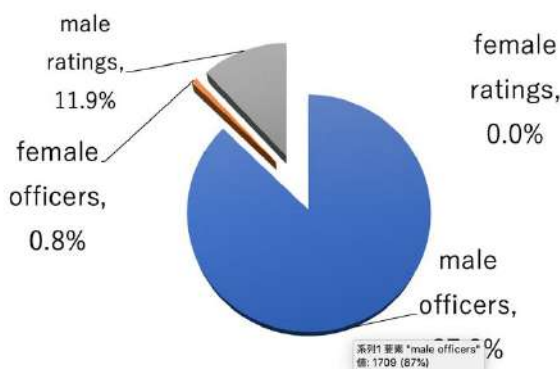


Chart -1: Distribution by rank and sex in the Japanese International Shipping Industry (Cargo ships)

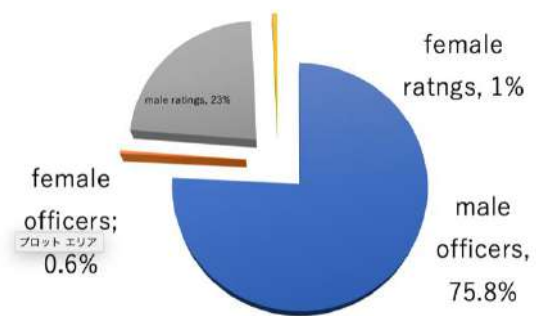


Chart -2: Distribution by rank and sex in the Japanese Domestic Shipping Industry (Cargo ships)

As described above, these graphs show the distribution by rank and sex in the international shipping industry as well as in the domestic shipping industry. As is apparent from these graphs, women seafarers in Japan comprise a very small number. I shall examine the reason for this. Please note the graph given below:

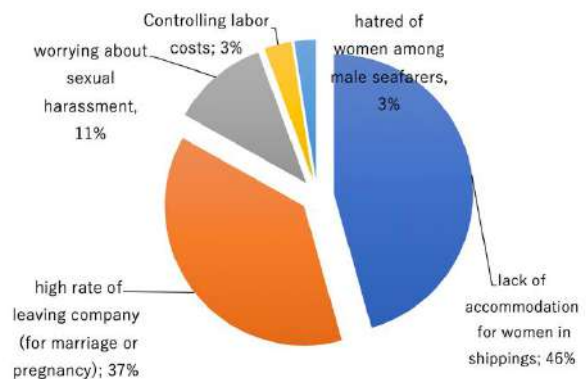


Chart -3: The reason for the unemployment of women seafarers

This graph shows the main reasons for the unemployment of women seafarers in Japanese domestic shipping companies. The most important reasons are the company’s small size, so that they cannot afford to provide facilities for women on their ships, and they cannot afford to give women any training because of a reduction in the workforce. In addition, many of them have strong reservations about the difficulties that may be caused by sexual harassment. In the Japanese shipping world, there is a considerable disparity between the international shipping industry and the domestic one. I got the impression from my survey that among various types of occupations in Japan, there is no occupation with such a considerable disparity in the status of workers than seafaring. In some international shipping companies in Japan, seafarers, as well as employees who are on shore duty, are supposed to get onto the elite track, getting higher education, all of whom receive an upper grade certificate of competency in

seamanship after their graduation from college, university, or post-graduate school. The three biggest companies in the Japanese international shipping world, NYK, MOL, and K-Line, have several women seafarers because of their policy to employ at least one women seafarer a year. It was NYK that came up with the first strategy to hire a woman deck officer in 2003, and after that, all three of the biggest companies have continued to employ women officers as both mates and engineers. Administrators of these companies declared that they were never conscious of gender differences with their women colleagues, and they emphasize women's abilities regardless of gender.

However, male seafarers who worked at the small domestic companies can be said to be so-called blue-collar workers, getting only a low level of education and a lower class license just for domestic shipping. The smaller the company, the truer this is. So it would seem that people in international shipping companies are endowed with views of gender equality so that they see their women colleagues as seafarers, not as women. But people in the domestic shipping companies, except a few, seem unable to adjust to the idea of gender equality so that they recognize their women colleagues as women, not as seafarers. I think that, generally speaking, uneducated and uncultured men tend to have sexist thinking towards women in their workplaces. Although I have no idea whether they will have problems with sexual harassment or not after hiring women as seafarers, personnel managers may worry too much about potential problems that may never exist.

Moreover, we should note that companies raise the high rate of leaving the company for marriage or pregnancy as a reason for the unemployment of women. Regrettably, it is true that most Japanese women tend to quit their jobs after marriage or pregnancy. It may be surprising to learn that in Japan most women dedicate themselves wholly to being housewives after marriage. Irrespective of the type of work, it causes losses to companies that their workers give up their jobs after being trained. This is especially true in the shipping industry, which is regarded a distinctive domain. The smaller the company, the more they will suffer financially. Considering this, it is natural for companies to avoid hiring women. Most companies I investigated demanded that women employees stay at least three years, while admitting that most women are excellent and motivated when entering the company. Considering this, the responsibility rests with women, because it suggests that women have a weak sense of professionalism.

On the other hand, I could mention the reason why the five domestic shipping companies hire some women seafarers. Please note the graph as follows:

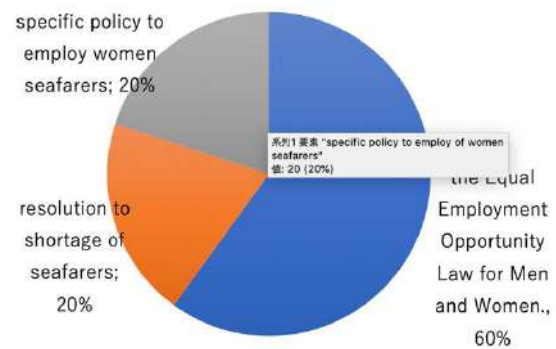


Chart -3:The reason for the employment of women seafarers

This graph shows the reasons for employing women seafarers from the five companies I investigated. I cannot deny that the main reason women are hired is the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, although some companies are still unwilling to hire women. The next reason is the shortage of seafarers in Japanese domestic shipping companies. A senior management director told me that they want very much to hire talented male seafarers but, even suffering from a labour shortage, they are unwilling to hire women as seafarers.

Interestingly, among the companies under my investigation, three companies have female presidents, one of which employs women seafarers. A specific policy to employ women seafarers was given by this company as the reason. But the presidents of two other companies strongly rejected hiring woman seafarers in spite of their own gender. They insist that seafaring is very hard profession, therefore women are unqualified for it. As I referred to earlier, compared with the international shipping industry, the domestic one is harder. As for the international one, there are many ratings in ships, so officers do not need to be jacks-of-all-trades, but in domestic shipping, there are only four or five positions without distinction between an officer and a rating. Domestic shipping is called "three K." Please see the PowerPoint slide (6).

I mentioned earlier that seafaring is not dominated just by men. The reason I believe so is that there were so many women seafarers in former times when motor-powered sailing vessels were enormously helpful in domestic shipping in Japan. It could be said that the Japanese domestic shipping industry was supported by motor-powered sailing vessels in former days. At that time, the business was so small, and most were family operations, so-called family ships. Ship owners had their wives on board to control labour costs. In 1950s and 1960s, family ships navigated by women had a surprising increase in number, meaning that domestic shipping in those days was maintained by the activities of women. Nevertheless, today women seafarers in the shipping industry have been a minority for the several reasons I have mentioned. I concluded that there are

vast differences between women seafarers in former times and those of today. The former was the person on whom the family depended for financial support by being on board; the latter regards her job as temporary until marriage.

There is crucial difference between seafaring and other traditionally male jobs, namely that women seafarers are required to work away from home for extended periods. It is certain that this causes particular difficulties for a woman continuing her seafaring, although absence from home can be problematic for all seafarers. As a result, most decide to quit their jobs after marriage.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the small number of women seafarers in Japan is caused by the combined effects of the shipping companies and the women themselves. The former would rather avoid hiring women because of their perceived weak sense of professionalism, and the latter are caught in a dilemma between their job and their family, with the result that women usually quit their jobs in deference to their families. It could be said that the shipping industry in Japan is caught in a vicious cycle. Unfortunately, It may be doubted that there is presently a good solution to this problem, but we should absolutely find the resolution, because the presence of more women aboard ships is the most obvious way to modify the exiting seafaring culture, and given the current officer shortage, actively recruiting women would benefit the industry.

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



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