

“THE BODY” MATTERS IN MARITIME EMPLOYMENT CONTRACTS

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Abstract Despite various efforts to promote women seafarers in the maritime sector, the number of women seafarers has not been significantly improved in the last 25 years. In 1992, when the International Maritime Organization (IMO) made an estimation of the percentage of women seafarers, it was reported as only one or two percent of the total seafaring population (Belcher et al., 2003). The latest manpower report from BIMCO and ICS (2016) indicates that only one percent accounts for women officers and cadets in deck and engine departments. Over the years, the maritime education and training (MET) sector has been observing some increase of female student enrolment in nautical and engineering courses. Nevertheless, the employment of women seafarers/cadets is still a challenge in many countries. It is known that some shipping companies prefer male seafarers to females due to their perceived risk factors in relation to their gender. For example, having a woman in the male-dominated workplaces, both on board and in port, may be regarded as disruption or disorder to their work due to the woman’s “body” being a part of the work environment. Shipping companies may possibly consider it as a risk that women bring sexuality and, consequently, social disorder into the ship environment. However, what makes this generalised assumption that women are considered risk factors as well as possibly being at risk themselves? The paper argues how “the body” matters when shipping companies employ women seafarers in terms of their morals and responsibilities over women on board ships. Based on Pateman’s (1988) sexual contract theory, the concept of “the body” helps us to understand why women have more difficulties than men to access to work on vessels. This paper discusses such employment barriers due to risk perceptions about women seafarers/cadets from a feminist perspective by linking between “the body” and “employment contracts”. To understand why some shipping companies are reluctant to employ women seafarers, the paper argues how women’s “body” is considered to be an important element of their employment contracts, to be managed by those companies. Starting with three different

categories about “the body”: the body as nature, the body as socially constructed, and the body as subjectivity, common perceptions towards women seafarers are revisited. The paper points out the issue of how gender could influence the generalised understanding of risks in the maritime employment contracts. It concludes with the suggestions to the maritime industry on how to transform towards gender-inclusive employment.

Keywords: Body · Social contract theory · Sexual contract theory · Maritime employment · Risk

1. Introduction

The sea has been regarded to be the place for men’s work for a long time. This notion is largely shared in many parts of the world, creating stereotypes for maritime professions, including seafarers. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) launched the programme for the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector (IWMS) in 1988. The vision of equality enshrined in the United Nations (UN) Charter was the core of the strategy in this programme (Tansey, 2015). In the process of developing the programme, other major UN’s initiatives were born, such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Later, the Manila conference of the International Convention of Seafarers’ Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping, 1978 (STCW) issued a resolution to recognise women as important maritime human resources (IMO, 2010). In 2013, IMO supported the Regional Conference on the Development of Global Strategy for Women Seafarers, in Busan, Republic of Korea. The outcome of this conference was to publish the Busan Declaration to call for a cooperation among stakeholders to support women seafarers. Another conference was held by the World Maritime University (WMU) in 2014; the 2nd International Conference on Maritime Women: Global Leadership (MWGL 2014) was concluded with the MWGL Declaration, advocating women’s leadership in the maritime sector. In 2015, the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the MDGs to further elaborate the importance of gender equality (SDG Goal 5) as a cross-cutting issue to achieve all the other SDGs.

Despite these political engagements and instruments to advocate gender equality in the maritime sector for almost 30 years, the number of women seafarers has not been improved as expected. In 1992, IMO estimated the population of women seafarers as approximately one or two percent of the total seafaring workforce and this includes those who work in hotel and

catering sections (Belcher et al., 1992). The recent statistics from the manpower report (BIMCO/ICS, 2016) identify women seafarers in marine sections approximately one percent of their dataset. An overall picture of women's representation in seafaring has not significantly changed in the last 25 years. The reason behind is considered to be remaining stereotypes about women seafarers who tend to be regarded as not physically and mentally strong enough to work on board (Kitada, 2010, 2013). In fact, some shipping companies are still hesitant to recruit women seafarers (Belcher et al., 2003; Zhang and Zhao, 2015). So why are some companies not motivated to employ women seafarers? This paper presents an account of the obstacles for women seafarers in terms of women's "bodies". We want to look into possible explanations for this, focusing on women as "bodies". Simultaneously, we want to emphasise that men also have "bodies" and are as gendered as women. The differences between these gendered processes – the male and female ones – and their implications for work life at sea lie at the core of our discussion.

2. Gender, Bodies, and Organisations

2.1. Gender-imbalanced organisations

In gender-imbalanced organisations, for example, a ship which mostly is strongly male-dominated, social bonds will naturally forge between those of the majority gender (Aronson and Kimmel, 2004). The gender identity which is developed becomes more accentuated than identities in more gender-balanced organisations. Stereotypical gender expressions become the norm within such a context. The majority of gender expressions are looked upon as the "normal" (Rosenberg, 2002). The gender norms and expressions will build an organisational culture which tends to be one-linear and quite strong.

2.2. Bodies and sexuality

Bodies are more than "mere" bodies, and they are also bearers of sexuality. This is an unescapable fact even in situations when it is emphasised that sexuality is of no consequence, for example, when it comes to life in work organisations (Alvesson and Billing, 2009). There are no "sexuality free" organisations; latent sexuality will always exist and may surface at times and occasions to different degrees in different organisations. Expectations concerning bodily and sexual behaviour in organisations are socially constructed and might be different for men and women. Such expectations might also differ between organisations.

2.3. The enclosed social organisation: the total institution

In a specific context of shipboard work/life, we consider Erving Goffman's classic definition of a total institution to be a useful framework for the analysis of the ship organisation:

“A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”
(1961:11).

A ship may be looked upon as a laboratory where organisational issues due to the physical isolation from the wider society become specifically distinct. The previous mentioned issues of gender imbalance, bodies and sexuality will thus be illuminated, strengthened and highlighted in this enclosed social organisation.

3. How do “bodies” matter in the maritime sector?

When social organisations become gender imbalance, in this case, a male-dominated organisation in the maritime sector, women's “bodies” can be considered as “unusual” in the work environment. Firstly, “the body” may be understood as nature, focusing on biological differences between men and women. The reproductive capacity of women can be understood as almost the only worthy role that women can play, by contrasting a man's world on board ships.

Secondly, what we understand male and female today can be constructed through a socialisation process. “The body” as socially constructed provides us an account that male-dominated occupational and organisational cultures have shaped the idea of male and female “bodies”. Butler (1999) argues that “the body” is not “being” but a variable boundary, making cultural friction of gender apparent as if they are real. Most of gender biases argued in the maritime sector requires a careful examination of whether they are real or just imaginary.

Thirdly, Connel (1987) states that cultural practices of defining the differences of male and female by a distinct set of fashions, for example, is a way of achieving “the body” as subjectivity. In this way, fashions have successfully distinguished between the bodies of men and women. For example, women's clothes and accessories, such as skirts, high-heels, and handbags, are symbolic to female bodies whereas men's ties, shirts, and flat shoes are established by masculine styling for male bodies. It is also obvious that the designs of shipboard workplaces and clothes assume that seafarers are male.

Pateman (1988) argues in her sexual contract theory how women's "body" is considered to be an important element of their employment contracts. She identifies the problem in the classical social contract theory, which is not just contracting a person's labour or abilities, but also a person's entire body and mind. This anticipation matches how the shipping companies see the risk of women seafarers as their employees and do not want to take a responsibility over women's "bodies" at possible risks at work. In seafaring, women's "bodies" are considered to be riskier than men's. As a matter of fact, men's bodies are also exposed to various risks if women are protected. But why is it ok for men to take risks and not being protected? Is it ok not to give the same level of attention to men's safety in terms of gender equality? We might want to question what is normally accepted in the maritime sector from a gender lens.

4. Women as risk factors in the work environment on board

Based on the general considerations discussed so far, we will look into whether women's bodies per se can be considered as a risk factor for the work environment on board. Since all organisations will try to eliminate risk factors, this might illuminate why so few women are employed at sea. The question of risk and femininity may be approached from different angles:

- 1) Are female seafarers and their bodies more likely to represent risk factors in the work processes than male seafarers and their bodies? In other words: Is there anything workwise connected to the female body that could be a barrier for hiring more women? For example, are they more involved in work accidents and do they have difficulties in participating in work processes due to their physical bodies? The question of gender and risk has been discussed by several researchers (see for example, Ertac and Gurdal, 2012; Mather and Lighthall, 2012). When a difference in risk behaviour between men and women can be noticed, it seems to be a general observation that women take fewer risks than men.
- 2) Women as well as men are bearers of their bodies in the work place as well as out of work. In a total institution like the ship, work time and time off work take place within the same physical context. Such an organisational situation will highlight the gendered bodies and the gendered expectations – including sexuality – towards men and women. Due to this, the question of risk can be looked upon as the social and cultural risks of integrating women, women's bodies and women's sexuality in a work environment where the male is the "normal" (Rosenberg, 2002). Included in this discussion is also the question whether women are at greater risk of sexual abuse in strongly male-dominated organisations. We

choose to concentrate upon these social and cultural risk aspects of women and female bodies within a maritime work environment. Possibly, vital barriers for an increase of female employment at sea lie here.

4.1. Social and cultural risks inherent in female seafarers' bodies

Alvesson and Billing (2009) argue that the shared male identity in a male-dominated work place may weaken when women enter. The risk of disruption of the organisational culture by women can be considered to be particularly strong in a total institution like a ship.

Women enter the ship work place with their female bodies. Their bodies become obvious reminders of the existence of a hetero-normative sexuality (Rosenberg, 2002), the most widely accepted form of sexuality in general. Without women on board, the hetero-normative sexuality is evident through pictures, films, books, and talk. It is widely acknowledged that sexual artefacts of different kinds are alive and well at ships (Kajser, 2005; Bolsø, Langåker, Mühleisen, 2017). Such artefacts – calendar girls, porno movies, “teenager talk”, sexist jokes – can be looked upon as manifestations of a male culture in which it may be difficult for organisational members not to partake. Also, these male artefacts will function as exclusion mechanisms vis-à-vis women (Acker, 1990). A sexual emphasis can be argued to be a token of a male culture in which men’s bodies with their integral heterosexual desires have to be placed “on wait” until they reach known or unknown shores again. Whether or not there exist homosexual mini-cultures behind the visible expressions of a heterosexual culture we do not know much about. What is known, however, is that it is the male heterosexual culture which is “exhibited” within the normal and more or less stable life of the ship culture.

When women enter a ship organisation, things change. The female bodies are living reminders of gender and sexuality, and gender roles and identities – which previously were of no apparent concern due to only the male gender being represented on board – become important. It is often presented as if it is the women and their bodies that introduce sexuality onto the ship, notwithstanding the numerous examples of existing sexual artefacts previously mentioned. In accordance with such a view, there are norms and rules for women and their bodies in order not to disturb the existing culture. At the same time, though, “double” expectations can be found in that women are expected not to appear as women and also to live out their femininity as women, at least partially, on board. The complexity of this social process is described by Kajser (2005) who talks about clear norms for female seafarers’ behaviour. What is important to notice is that it seems to be the responsibility of the newcomers – the women – to manage the “sexual

climate” on board. It is as if the women and their bodies are the sole bearers of sexuality and that men and their bodies in a rather peculiar way can be seen as being mentally “attacked” by the inherent sexuality in women’s bodies. Women are told – or not told, but get the understanding – that they ought not to provoke the surroundings by their femininity and inherent sexuality. There are dress codes, codes for sun bathing, etc. in order to prevent the female bodies to become sexualized in a work setting which is supposedly difficult to keep stable, quiet and efficient if energy is used in sexual play, intrigues, emotions, and so on (Kitada, 2010; Bolsø, Langåker, Mühleisen, 2017). And a stable work environment – as far as any work environment can be stable – is probably even more important aboard a ship than it is in a land-based work place. The totality of the institution accounts for this.

4.2. When a woman – or a man – is hired, her or his body is also hired

According to Pateman (1988), a person’s body as well as their mental and physical capacities are contracted in a work relationship. What is a point of interest is that at times organisations seem to forget that this relates to both men and women. Men’s bodies and minds as well as expectations towards their behaviour are as gendered as women’s are, although often in different ways.

We have argued how a ship work environment in the vast majority of instances is male-dominated and, accordingly, male gender roles and gender expectations constitutes normality. We have also argued that a ship organisation is vulnerable when women and their bodies enter – and that the women who enter might be vulnerable as well. We have pointed to a set of imagined risks that may enable us – at least partly – to comprehend why it seems difficult for women to become employed at sea: a perceived risk of more accidents and work difficulties, the possible risk of sexual abuse, and the risk of a destabilization of the work environment.

Kajser (2005) argues that issues about sexuality and bodies in organisations can be visible, non-visible or secret. It is our impression that these issues can be considered to be both visible, non-visible and secret within the maritime sector. As far as we know, these are topics that are not often talked about within the industry in a formal way. In their discussion of managerial moral muteness, Bird and Waters (1989) argue that ethical questions often are avoided due to perceived threats of harmony, threats of efficiency and threats of power and effectiveness. It is not difficult to suppose that such “threats” – consciously or subconsciously – may prevent managers/captains in the maritime industry from raising the issues of women and men as bodies

onto the organisational agenda. If the maritime industry has an interest in employing more female seafarers, then this muteness has to be overcome.

5. Coping the challenges – Conclusions and Suggestions

In order to move towards a more gender-inclusive employment situation at sea, an openness relating to the mentioned gender issues has to be accomplished. Shipping companies and their managements have to find the organisational bravery to lift the discussed gender issues onto the formal agenda, thereby recognising their importance within the specific organisational context. The existing muteness has to be conquered.

Given the maritime industry's very international profile, resulting in different nationalities being represented on board a ship, it is not unreasonable to assume that cultural and ethnic aspects are inherent in the ways gender is looked upon and enacted within the organisations at sea. Tolerance towards different culture and ethnicity in the organisations can be learned through gender-sensitive training from managers to employees at all levels.

We need more research to illuminate these and other questions concerning gender in the seafaring environment. Up till now, there seems to have been limited interest within the research society to explore ships as gendered organisations. In its role as a societal actor, the maritime industry is able to encourage and ask for such research. There is a reason to believe that improved knowledge is the essential tool in order to improve the present-day situation.

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