

Female students' perspective for maritime career

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Abstract

The paper presents the outcome of the research that has been completed recently at the Faculty of Navigation (FoN); Maritime University of Szczecin, Poland. The aim of the research is to show the maritime society what female students – future maritime women – think about studying the navigation and future work at sea. The research has been done by a group of female students – prospective seafarers. It is based on a questionnaire directed to fellow female students which contains 29 questions concerning the motivation for commencing the study in the field of maritime navigation, aspirations, fears and obstacles faced by female seafarers related to present study, internship onboard seagoing ships and future work. 128 female students responded to the questionnaire. The answers have been gathered into groups of interest. The findings are presented in terms of diagrams and comments. The paper contains valuable information that may be used by maritime universities, ship owners and other potential employers of maritime female students – in particular maritime policy makers. One of the interesting findings is that 84% of the female students declare they would choose the same field of study having experience (including seagoing intership) gained so far. The paper presents also the change of the number of female students at FoN in the last 10 years. It is the sign of relatively high interest of young women in maritime navigation in Poland – the country that is one of the biggest suppliers of officers for seagoing ships.

Introduction

Despite their growing presence, women's participation in the transport industry is still limited, particularly in certain transport subsectors [1] – especially in the maritime transport. A number of projects have been reported aiming at analyzing the increasing role played by women in the maritime transport and identifying the most significant future challenges facing women (regarded as workers) and other stakeholders of the maritime industry, in particular shipowners; for example [2, 3]. The promotion of gender equality and the empowering of women is a goal of most United Nations specialized agencies. In particular the International Maritime Organization (IMO) created the *Strategy on the integration of Women in the Maritime Sector* as a comprehensive policy to expand women's capabilities in the maritime sector through education, training and knowledge transfer [4].

Nevertheless, it is still rare to find female workers at sea. According to International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) only 2% of the world's maritime workforce are women, mainly in the cruise and ferries sector [5]. *Shipping has historically been a male-dominated industry and that tradition runs long and deep. However, through its global programme on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector (IWMS), International Maritime Organization (IMO) is making a concentrated effort to help the industry move on from that tradition and to help women achieve a representation within it that is more in keeping with twenty-first century expectations* [6]. During last 20–30 years Poland – in particular its maritime universities (in Szczecin and in Gdynia) – has widely opened the door for young women to provide them education and training together with men in frame of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification

and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW Convention) in order to enable them acquiring the highest level of competence that shipping industry demands [7]. Consequently, women are expected to take positions on board ships on the management level and in shore-based institutions of the maritime industry in broader way than at present. Talking about gender equality is common nowadays. Women desire to be educated and take up positions as high as men, accordingly model of traditional housewife is becoming old fashioned.

Not much has been said in the literature how young women, in fact girls aged 20 years, perceive their present study at maritime universities and future employment on board ships. In order to fill this gap a research has been done by a group of female students of the Faculty of Navigation (FoN), Maritime University of Szczecin, Poland – prospective seafarers. It is based on a questionnaire directed to fellow female students which contains 29 questions concerning the motivation for commencing the study in the field of maritime navigation, aspirations, fears and obstacles faced by female seafarers related to present study, internship on-board seagoing ships and future work. 128 answers have been received. The respondents are aged from 19 to 24 years, some of them are already experienced and some have just a little knowledge about ships, working on board and sailing.

Number of female students in the Faculty of Navigation, Maritime University of Szczecin, Poland

According to [8] women seafarers representation in Poland amounted in 2001 from 0.7% to 0.9% of total number of seafarers. Women were employed mainly on passenger ships in hotel department. During last decades the number of female students studying maritime navigation in Poland increased significantly. Since 30–40 years ago there were only few female students at the maritime universities, at present this number is relatively high and stable. This creates a new situation for the faculties as well as for the crews’ recruitment process and crew agencies. The number of female and male students at FoN is shown in the figure 1.

The percentage of female students in comparison with total number of students at FoN varies from 14% to 20% in the period from 2003 to 2013.

New opportunities for women and increasing numbers of female students constitute a possible way of combating the present and predicted shortage of trained and competent seafarers, which is expected to amount about 36–46 thousand world-

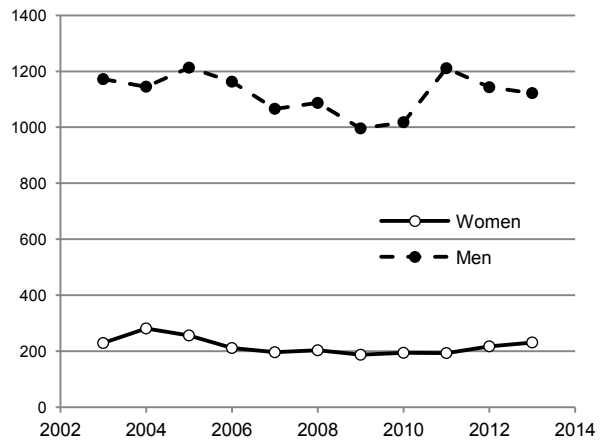


Fig. 1. Number of female students from 2003 to 2013 at FoN

wide [8]. For example, since Poland is one of the greatest supplier of the seafarers, positioned on top ten in the world [9, 10], increasing number of women enrolled in maritime education and training institutions in Poland is a good sign of contribution to IMO, ILO and some governmental policies aiming at attraction and promotion of women in maritime sector.

Motivation, inspiration and fears

“It is hard to explain... It is like magnetic power. Someone who has not been bitten by the sailing bug would not understand it” – said on the interview for polish television Dorota Kobylińska-Walas, first polish female captain certified in 1962.

The female students were asked about their motivation to choose the Maritime University. The answers’ distribution is shown in the figure 2.

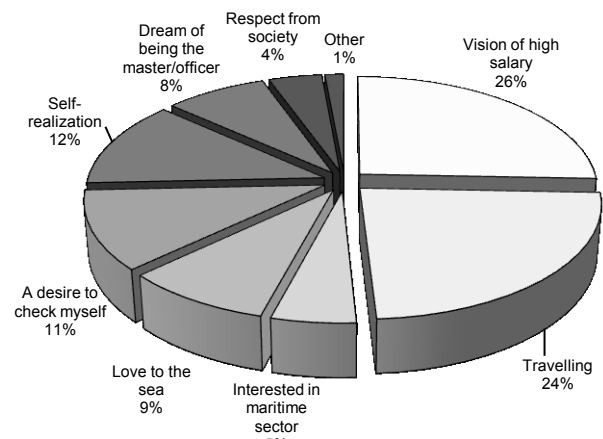


Fig. 2. Answers to the question “What was your motivation to choose Maritime University?”

The graph above shows that majority (25%) of the interviewees said that they wanted to get high salary. Over 23% of asked girls want to travel and 11% want to improve their skills in their dreamed job. Almost 8% of them said that they dreamt of

being well qualified officer or master. One of them said "It is a family tradition; I will be third generation in maritime sector". Two of them find it as great possibility to find a good job.

Another question was „What did you fear the most before you started education at Maritime University?” Figure 3 shows answers to this question.

Over 21% do have no fears. More than 30% of polish female students are afraid that there will be a problem to find a job even having an academic degree. It is well known that ship owners would like to have a hard-working, experienced and physically strong seafarers on board. Almost 25% said that they were afraid about psychological predisposition. Working at sea entails long-term contracts. Sometimes seafarers are away from home for many weeks or months. At open sea it is difficult to communicate with family and friends. Furthermore, people at sea often have depression, due to thoughts about spending major part of their life at sea. Among answers labeled as "other" there was such as "I am not engineer oriented" and "I am afraid about science and math's" or "There is a lot of exams I might fail". In fact, Maritime Universities in Poland are known as challenging studies.

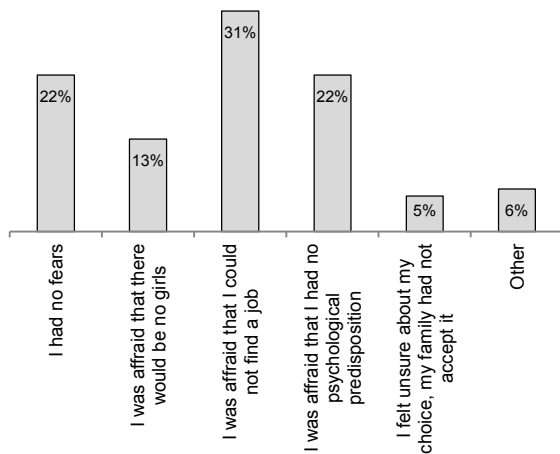


Fig. 3. Answers to the question: "What did you fear the most before you started education at Maritime University?"

The next question checked out what their families thought about their decision. The chart shows the result of it. Only a small part of interviewees (8%) said that their loved ones did not accept their decision what is shown in the figure 4.

The outcome of another question "What was your expectation of the study?" is shown on figure 5. Nearly half of answers indicate that young females go to maritime study with the aim to be well prepared to work at sea or ashore. Also very important is academic degree on bachelor's level. Three girls find it as great possibility to find a husband.

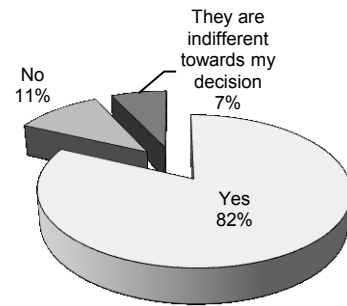


Fig. 4. Answers to the question: "Has your family accepted university that you chose?"

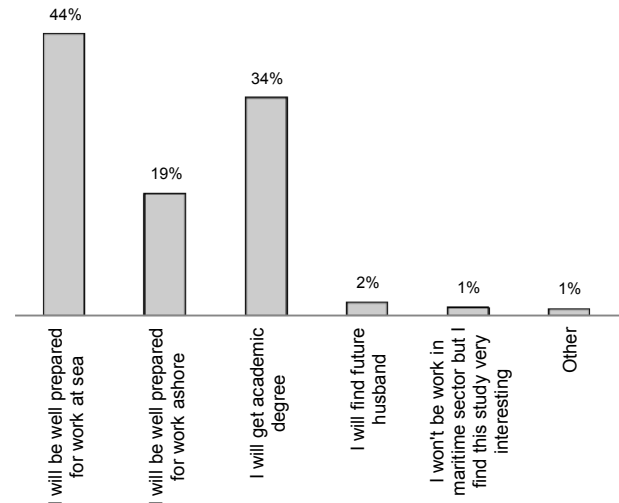


Fig. 5. Answers to the question: "What was your expectation of the study?"

Internship onboard seagoing vessels

The curriculum in the Maritime University of Szczecin is divided into two basic stages. The first stage lasting 6 terms (therr years) is devoted to the theoretical knowledge of navigation and ship operation. During this time students have the opportunity to experience short internship organized by the University on training vessels. This enables them to implement previously acquired theoretical knowledge under supervision of qualified staff. The second stage lasting 2 terms (one year) is devoted to the seagoing internship onboard merchant vessels. In general students have to organize this internship by themselves. During the training, students obtain the skills which supplement their theoretical knowledge and shape particular characteristics necessary in work as an officer of watch. The skills are recorded in the *On Board Training Record Book*. Completion of the internship equals with admitting the student to defend his/her BSc (Bachelor of Science) diploma which results in graduation. Students are obliged also to complete specific courses in order to obtain all the mandatory certificates which are in compliance with the STCW 1978/95.

Problems with finding job as an apprentice

Solely in year 2013 there was a total number of 1353 students at FoN, including 231 girls on full-time and part-time studies. Taking such huge number of candidates into account, finding maritime training occurs to be often long and time consuming process which involves much devotion, sacrifice and continuous acquisition of knowledge. It is especially difficult to win a contract while one still has to study and does not have any prior experience. The above mentioned problems may be accompanied by one more, that is the gender aspect. However, there was not any research on this topic; the outcomes provided by the survey conducted at the Maritime University of Szczecin indicate that women have more problems with commencing their career as a deck officer. About 63% of respondents admitted to have struggled with finding a position of a cadet from the first stages. For 67% of them the biggest problem was the resentment of crewing agencies as well as of the ship owners who dislike the idea of employing women. The most common arguments given by the maritime agencies in response to female students' applications were: worse physical efficiency of women, the lack of psychological predisposition to work onboard the vessel, their promiscuity and emotional instability and improper social conditions on vessels. There is a quotation of one of the respondents which illustrates above situations: *"I was denied the planned apprenticeship because the cabins were double and I would have been the only woman on the vessel so it simply was not cost-effective for the ship owner."*

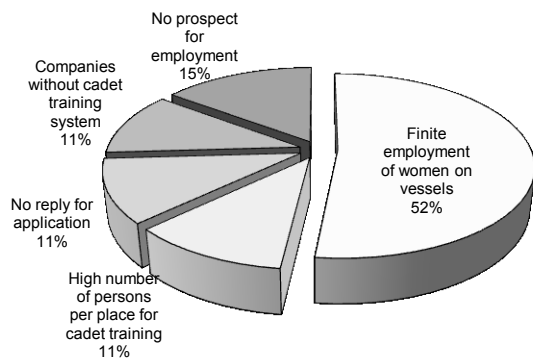


Fig. 6. Problems with finding apprenticeship on board seagoing vessels

The problems after embarkation on the vessel

Other problems occur while one has already embarked on the vessel. Almost 1/3 of respondents admit to have come across unequal treatment during the sea training. About 26% of female students responded that during onboard internship they witnessed or were subject to discrimination which was

manifested through astringent comments or vulgar behaviour of the male part of the crew. 18% of the interviewee admitted that even though they possessed greater knowledge, qualifications and worked harder than male students on the same vessel, they were not treated equally with them and in many instances they encountered the behaviour aiming at humiliation of women.

The situations where women get less work to do than other crew members are also common. Such behaviour, though not meant to abase a cadet woman, does not positively influence the crew's morals. One of the respondents wrote *"I was spared due to what the rest of the crew was aggrieved"*. The deck officers, according to asked female students, also do not hide the grudge that they bear against female cadets on vessels. It often appears as a animosity in teaching during the watch on the bridge or by such statement that women are distraction for officers during work. Nonetheless, it is a pointless argument regarding the fact that in plenty of other work places men and women work under identical rules. Other important problems which were enumerated by the respondents comprise doubting the professional qualifications of women and common opinion that women shall not work at sea.

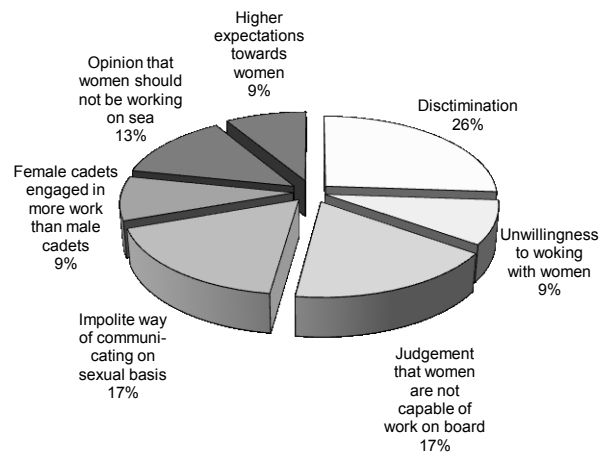


Fig. 7. Types of improper behaviour towards women on board ships

Undeniably, the presence of women on a vessel poses a problem for men. Such attitude is understandable regarding the fact that work in maritime transport was perceived for a long time as a male dominated one. However, one should pay attention to the evidence that most of above mentioned problems are connected with the stereotypical perception of women and their social position. Moreover, the female students of maritime universities pursue the work as a deck officer and, as it is commonly known, this position does not require increased fitness and physical strength.

The majority of female students, however, do not give up in pursuing the officer degree. Only 8% of women after internship onboard the vessel realised that this work is physically (4%) or psychologically hard (4%). Concluding from the above data one may claim that women who decide to work on sea are fully conscious of the conditions of this work.

Although, there are more and more women at sea every year the number of female officers remains meagre. The most women work on shore. All asked students admitted they have met women working ashore, unfortunately only 23% confirmed they have met a woman holding an officer position onboard.

The positive aspects of having connections in maritime business

The results of the conducted research show that about 65% of female students have a family member working at sea. In turn, 91% regard having such person in family as beneficial in many aspects. The most often presented argument (about 60% of respondents), is the possibility to receive help while looking for the training opportunity or work. They name some factors which they find helpful, that is contacts with people who work on the sea, the possibility to recommend a student to a given shipowner by a relative or the direct contacts in companies employing seafarers. The ability of receiving educational help during studies turned to be of high value. The female students admitted that experience of people related to sea creates some kind of view how does the situation on sea looks like and it is helpful in making decisions regarding the course of further studies.

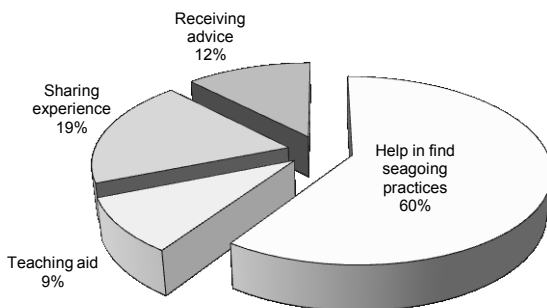


Fig. 8. Advantages of having family connections in maritime business

The perception

With the growth of number of girls at maritime universities the young society is familiarized with the declining stereotype regarding women at sea. It is nicely illustrated through the answers provided

by the respondents to the question on the position of women in the current maritime sector. The answers of the female students were clearly divided into three aspects with almost proportional division to each one.

The first group of answers presents that women are more determined in pursuing the set goal and more ambitious which is supported by following answers: *"(...) the prevailing stereotype considerably facilitates the work for men. However, I strongly believe that due to this women are more determined and ambitious in pursuing the set aim and they are aware that their task is much more difficult for they are women."* or, *"(...) As it was proven in many cases, women occurred to be psychologically stronger, more resourceful and they easily cope with the situations difficult to resolve."* What is more, women are also said to be prepared for hard work or the dice loaded against them by the co-workers and they are aware of their weaker position on the labour market which is presented in the following answer, *"Women are calmer, more meticulous, accurate and focused on the given task. Each step is carefully planned in advance. In order to prove that they suit the given position, they are often better qualified than many of men and have the knowledge on every aspect of work on the sea"*.

The next group of female students claims quite on the contrary. They assume that women still hang way behind men concerning the work on the sea. *"Despite I am a woman, or maybe due to this, men are the one who are more sober and self-controlled. Moreover, they rather have the possibility and faculty to deal with challenging physical tasks. Men are characterized as courageous and confident whereas women in many cases change their mind on a given decision"*. The main reason of continuous male dominance is their physical strength. The respondents comment on this as: *"Man is definitely more suitable than a woman because he is stronger and also due to the fact that he is a male makes other workers treat him better"*. *"They are undeniably fitter, however, it is not always necessary factor to cope with tasks on the vessel."* Furthermore, it is argued that men are better seafarers for they are not influenced to such extent as women by the long lasting separation with family, which in turn for a woman is much more destructive, especially for the one who is a mother. The following statements serve as a proof to that: *"Man can separate the work and private life and does not approach various issues in such emotional manner as woman does."* or *"Man may simultaneously have family and sail while woman willing to have children must resign from career on sea"*.

The last group of respondents advocates equality. These female students feel that it does not matter whether one is a man or a woman but it is dependent on the individual characteristics, personality and psyche. The students illustrate it as follows: *“I think that both men and women have similar predispositions regarding work on the sea, for example, during maritime internship we did not give up as far as strength is concerned”* and *“I believe that there should not be any division of employment between seamen and “sea women” as duties and work are the same and everyone shall have opportunity to realise oneself within the crew”*. Some of the female students put emphasis on the advantages of co-educational crews. *“I think that mixed crews are actually good ones. Women are hard-working and deal with various tasks the same as men do. Women also often do their work more meticulously and precisely thus this is why they are such good sailors”*.

The Future

Nowadays, fresh graduates, despite the type of university, do not feel secure about their future. This is due to the fact that any education does not guarantee that one will find a desired job on the current labour market. Hence, young educated people begin their careers with their minds filled with distressful concerns about their future. Especially in case of female students, these concerns keep on multiplying. It is quite understandable with regard to prior difficulties with finding job as an apprentice onboard a vessel.

Theoretically, such majors as navigation and maritime engineering enable graduates to pick and choose between numerous ways of self-realization. Professional career of maritime graduates does not equal anymore only with the work on the vessel. There are more and more opportunities to work on the land and it does not mean that one must resign from the career connected with the maritime sector. Despite the fact that about 80% of the students have chosen the work on the vessel, women are well prepared to undertake the job provided on the land. The most popular work places indicated by the respondents are: maritime administration, sea tourism and international maritime organizations. The figure 9 shows considered places of employment.

The respondents who declared that they connect their future plans with work on the sea, more than 30% still does not specifically know how long are they willing to work as seafarers. Nearly 30% of female students stated that they are going to sail as long as they obtain the degree of senior officer or master. It shows how determined and courageous

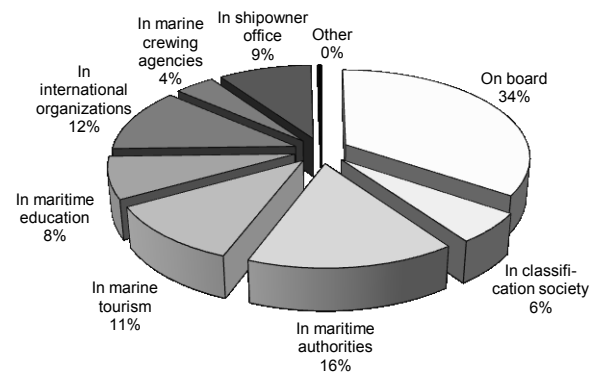


Fig. 9. Answers to question: *“In which maritime sector would you prefer to be employed?”*

women are. In addition, it demonstrates the extent to which the stereotypes and prejudice have changed as far as the women inferiority in maritime branch is concerned. The most important question relates to the family aspect. Almost the same number of female students admits that they are able to sacrifice the work at sea in order to start a family. For the considerable majority of our society it still constitutes one of the most vital events in life. However, the specific kind of work of a seafarer which includes long lasting separation, high level of stress and occupational hazards, may comprise a barrier in forming a family. We have asked the students if they agree with presented opinion. The results are showed in figure 10.

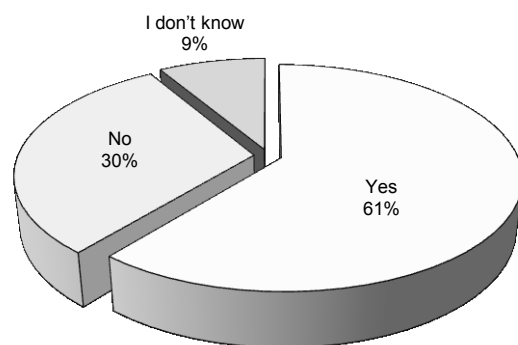


Fig. 10. Answers to question: *“Are you afraid that performing the profession of a seaman may make a start a family difficult?”*

According to 61% of answers provided by respondents this statement is true. Nonetheless, the extensive amount of women is ready to accept the challenge and reconcile the work with family life. About 71% of respondents serve as a proof to that, representing the number of people willing to start a family (enter the state of matrimony). There are about 65% of students who make a step further and seem to be more courageous by declaring to be willing to simultaneously work on a vessel and have and raise child or children. The young women are more enthusiastic to compromise in order to

cope with this obstacle which cannot be said about their mothers, grandmothers and prior generations.

The next relevant factor to consider while choosing the vessel is the physical kind of work and the conditions present there. Shipyards provide shipowners with the vast array of ship types. Each type has the specific environment, working conditions and the requirements towards seafarers – some of them are seen as typically male ones and other women friendly. Having the choice of three types of ships out of nine, more than 10% of female students surveyed have chosen the oil rig, which is said to be one of the heaviest sea unit. The leading vessels occurred to be passenger, specialized and merchant ones. The following diagram presents the precise distribution of answers.

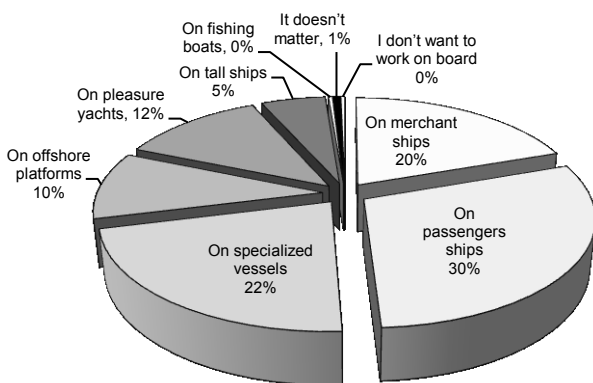


Fig. 11. Answers to question: "On which type of ships would you like to be employed?"

The last issue asked, regarding the projection of ones' future, was the choice of the length of contracts. Though this matter may seem insignificant, it highly influences the lifestyle of seafarers, their family life and social functioning ashore. The substantial majority of female students consider short-term contracts. About 40% would sign the so called one month on/off contract, that is one month at sea and one month ashore, more than 20% would like to sign a contract in week system, so two weeks on/off. The second mostly chosen contract with about 35% of votes is the most common system of three to four months on the sea and then the same amount of time ashore. The least popular option was the one with long-term contract that involves from six to eight months on the sea. Only 3% of respondents would sign such a contract.

Conclusions

It is observed that women encounter larger problems when it comes to finding a job as an apprentice onboard a ship. As the research shows most of the problems are related to gender reasons. The number of companies employing women onboard is

hardly perceptible. Due to the fixed number of female students which amounts 1/5 of all students at FoN it is substantial to treat women and men on equal basis. It could be beneficial for women if they would know that their road to helm is exactly the same as men's one.

What is more, there is a high competition among cadets because of insufficient number of companies with cadet training programme, what causes problems for young people who try to obtain required experience onboard vessels needed for Officer of Watch certificate.

Other findings of the research may be gathered in following statements:

- Vast majority of female students (82%) was supported by their families with regard to chosen field of study and future maritime career.
- Over 20% had no fears entering study of maritime navigation.
- Comparatively good salaries and possibility to travel were main arguments attracting young women to maritime sector (almost 50%).
- More than 60% of respondents are conscious of the obstacles regarding the start of a family. Despite these problems 71% of them are willing to combine work at sea and family life.
- 66% of students are taking into account work ashore in maritime sector after completion of the study.
- The most popular choices of female students with regard to ship type are unchangeably passenger ships and specialized vessels.
- It would be fruitful from the female point of view to make terms on board shorter as well as to develop support system for the family during duty on board.
- If there were more female onboard the issue of loneliness would decrease significantly.

There are few programmes which integrate women in Maritime Sector. One of them is IMO's programme on the Integration of Women in Maritime Sector (IWMS) which covers a primary objective to encourage IMO Member States to open the doors of their maritime institutes to enable women to train alongside men and so acquire the high level of competence that the maritime industry demands. Even though the programme is celebrating its 25 year, not much is known about it throughout the world. What do we recommend with the view to broaden the knowledge about women maritime associations is that it should be easily available for the interested. Information about them should be spread to every place connected with maritime industry, such as universities, maritime authorities'

offices and maritime agencies. The more people will know about them the higher response of the maritime society with regard to women leadership will become.

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