

*Original Contribution***WOMEN'S INTEREST IN MARITIME EDUCATION AT  
THE NIKOLA VAPTSAROV NAVAL ACADEMY IN VARNA****B. Belev\***

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**ABSTRACT**

United Nations Organization and its specialized agencies promoted gender equality and women employment in the Maritime industry as their main goal. Maritime Education and Training institutions are an integral part of this process. However, the primary role is given to ship owners and their manning agents around the World. Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy is a part of this big process of the general change in human thinking regarding the acceptance of women on board of merchant ships. The study in the article exposes the change of the process of admittance and graduation of women in the Academy. In this research, the method of interview is used to study the attitudes of female candidates in the Academy. The paper opens the door for the next research that need to be made in the recruitment market in order to find reasons for skepticism for women on board and how to break the conservative way of thinking.

**Key words:** Women as seafarers, Maritime Education, women recruitment in shipping

**INTRODUCTION**

The prohibition of discrimination in employment and occupation, as one of the International Labour Organization (ILO) fundamental principles and rights at work, should be treated in a holistic manner and address diversity as a whole. All seafarers regardless of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin, as well as nationality, gender, and sexual orientation have the right to equal opportunities and treatment. It is still rare to find women workers at sea but, largely thanks to trade unions, more women are confronting prejudice and becoming valuable members of the ships' crew (1). One of the biggest challenges is ensuring diversity in the hiring of seafarers.

Due to religious, political or national reasons, until the 19th century, women had very few rights, which extended to the limits of the household they were caring for.

Founded in 1919, the International Labor

Organization (ILO) remains a lasting mark on the development of the world economy. Guided by the idea of equality between men and women and the elimination of discrimination, in 1944 a conference in Philadelphia adopted the Declaration of the Missionary Mission and the Purposes of the ILO. It the declaration the Organization states that the rights of all human beings are equal irrespective of their race, sex or creed. In this respect, everybody, man or woman, has equal opportunity, freedom, and dignity. Subsequently, this Declaration becomes part (Annex) of the Constitution of each country. For ILO, women's rights are an integral part of the values, principles, and goals of promoting social justice and decent work. International labor standards are one of ILO's core tools to improve working and living conditions for women and men and promote equal workplace for all workers (2).

Statistically and globally speaking, men are more likely to get involved in the workforce than is possible for women. The United Nations report of 2015 shows that 77% of men and 50% of women of working age are part of the workforce. For the period 1995-2006, the labor force represented by women held a figure of around 52%. In 2010, the rate decreases to

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50 and remained so until 2015. Through men's point of view, their workforce has reached 80% in 1995, and with a small decrease, it reaches 77% in 2010, and this percentage is still up to 2015 (3).

In the last years of the XX century, the development of shipping and the opening of the world economy to hiring women in seemingly unusual positions in the maritime sector poses the question of the opportunities for their realization and the perception of their work by men in a traditionally male world.

There are not a lot of researches done on the gender difference in the shipping, especially on board ships. Existing research from the end of the XX-th century and the beginning of the XXI-st century has raised the issue of overcoming gender segregation (4-6). A leader in the research of these problems is the World Maritime University in Malmö, Sweden. Several Master and Ph.D. thesis have been developed there, which have a big contribution for the popularization of good practices. These developments are a good basis for analyzing the existing status of women as part of the ships' crews. From there, examples of good practice can be taken to solve similar problems at the national level (5, 7-9).

The study aims to show women's interest in maritime education at the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy in Varna. The author uses data from the Education department of the Academy regarding admission of students for the period 2008 to 2019, showing separately the admitted Bulgarian students and the admitted foreign students. Both types of statistical information have been used to draw some general conclusions about the findings, as well as to show national features in thinking about the problem.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In 1989 the International Maritime Organization (IMO) launched the "IMO Women in Development Program (WID)" (10). The aim of the program is expanding women's employability and capabilities in the maritime sector. The programme focused on equal access to maritime training through both mainstreaming programs and gender specific projects.

Statistic says that today women seafarers are only two percent of 1.2 million seafarers in the World. The most preferable part of the industry

is the cruise industry where 94 percent of female seafarers are working (11).

Azirh Nicholine Tifuh makes a detailed study how the IMO focuses its attention on women's employability and realization in the maritime sector. In her Ph.D. thesis named "Women merchant mariners: empowering West African women" the author presents all IMO initiatives in the new shipping era (7).

The IMO most essential development with respect to women started in 1988 through the work of its Integrated Technical Cooperation program, which has addressed the need to increase the employment of women from the developing nations in the maritime sector (19). Another direction of the program is the development of female human resources through education, training and the transfer of knowledge. Based on the United Nation's (UN) policy to develop female human resources and to strengthen the role of women in 1988, the IMO approved a "Strategy on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector", a comprehensive policy to strengthen women's capacity in the maritime sector (12). In order to integrate women into the mainstream maritime sector and to promote the endorsement of gender considerations, IMO launched its Strategy for Women in Development in 1988 (13).

In addition, the IMO Integrated Technical Cooperation program has led to six regional support networks established for the purpose of capacity building for women in the maritime sector. The six regional support networks are:

- Pacific Women Association (PacWIMA);
- Network for Professional Women in the Maritime and Port Sectors of West and Central Africa;
- Arab International Women's Maritime Forum for MENA and Africa;
- Association of Women Managers in the maritime sector of Eastern and Southern Africa (WOMESA);
- Association for Women Managers in the Maritime Sector, Asia (WIMA-Asia); and
- Forum for Women Managers in the Maritime Sector, Latin America (14).

In response to the global demands in the seafaring labour market, in 2008 IMO launched the "Go to Sea!" campaign, and focused on increasing the target audience of this campaign through the Regional

Conference on the Development of 87 Global Strategy for Women Seafarers, held in Busan, Republic of Korea in April 2013. One of the key outcomes of that event is a project for the preparation of a strategy for women seafarers, which will be implemented in 2014 by IMO in cooperation with World Maritime University. Moreover, the conference adopted a slogan: "Go to sea TOGETHER" in order to promote women seafaring (14).

IMO Public Information Service in collaboration with Technical Co-operation Division has produced a video entitled "Women at the Helm". This video has been screened for the first time at the above-mentioned conference in Busan (15). In addition to the implementation of Technical Cooperation activities, IMO promotes that both government and industry should provide men and women with equal access and opportunities for maritime training, jobs, and employment. The Organization recommends facilities on board ships, which are suitable for women, based on the 2006 General Conference of ILO resolution 2, concerning "the promotion of opportunities for women seafarers" (13). Moreover, under the 2010 Manila Amendments to the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW), resolution 14 concerns the "promotion of the participation of women in the maritime industry" (13).

"Empowering Women in the Maritime Community" has been selected as the World Maritime Day theme for 2019, the IMO says officially on its website (11). In this way IMO provides an opportunity to raise awareness of how gender equality is important and to highlight the contribution of women all over the world to the maritime sector.

At the beginning of the new Century under IMO guidance a professional network for improvement of gender balance in the shipping industry was established. Women in Maritime Associations (WIMAs) launched through IMO's gender and capacity-building programme since the beginning of XXI-st century are **(Figure 1)**:

- Pacific Women in Maritime Association (PacWIMA) set up in Fiji in February 2004 and relaunched in Tonga in April 2016.

- Network of Professional Women in the Maritime and Port Sectors for West and Central Africa launched in Benin in February 2007, set for a relaunch in 2019.
- Association for Women in the Maritime Sector in Eastern and Southern Africa (WOMESA) established in Kenya in December 2007.
- Women in Maritime Association, Asia (WIMA Asia) established in January 2010 and relaunched in the Philippines in 2015.
- Women in Maritime Association, Caribbean (WiMAC), set up in Jamaica in April 2015.
- The Arab Association for Women in the Maritime Sector (AWIMA), established in Egypt in October 2017. The second conference for AWIMA will be held in Egypt in the first quarter of 2019.
- Red de Mujeres de Autoridades Marítimas de Latinoamérica (Red-MAMLa), established in Chile in December 2017.

Sectoral Meeting on the Recruitment and Retention of Seafarers and the Promotion of Opportunities for Women Seafarers, held in Geneva, adopted the following conclusion: "There should be zero tolerance to harassment and bullying, including sexual harassment. Governments should take a proactive approach with respect to the elimination of harassment and bullying. The 2016 amendments to the MLC, 2006, include a reference to the ICS/ITF Guidance on eliminating shipboard harassment and bullying. 6 The operationalization of the guidance and its practical implementation at the national level can help change shipboard cultures and develop a working environment in which all seafarers are treated with dignity and respect. Effective policies and timely response to complaints relating to harassment and bullying would render the industry more attractive to potential seafarer (16).

In this way, ILO and IMO unite their efforts for equal treatment of men and women in the maritime industry. This demonstration of unanimity on such an important and up-to-date problem gives hope that the long-standing dogmas in the professional development of men and women in shipping will soon be overcome.



**Figure 1.** Women in Maritime Associations – World map

Source: <http://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/TechnicalCooperation/Pages/WomenInMaritime.aspx>

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maritime Education and Training is crucial in molding future seafarers who are gender and culture-sensitive. MET institutions are expected to play multifaceted roles in the education and training of maritime students. Such roles include:

- serving as a training ground for future men and women who are expected to be equipped with the technical knowledge, skills and attitude as part of the formulaic triad of competencies;
- breeding future seafarers with sensitive minds and character, making them more aware, understanding and adaptive to diverse cultural orientations;
- developing the kind of mindset that removes gender biases and rises above cultural differences;
- increasing gender and cultural awareness by integrating such ideals in their curriculum and instruction (17).

Bulgarian maritime education dates since 1881. Towards the end of the 20th century, the trainees were men. Changes in the World over the last 3 decades have changed the imagination of shipping traditions. Since the second half of the 20th century, there have been examples of female captains, mechanics, and electric engineers. But these are exceptions that are more of an exotic character than a rule of equality. The reasons why women have not been in the ship's crew for a long time are essentially physiological and emotional. Attempts and efforts to achieve gender equality have enabled women to look at the "male"

professions and declare their desire to seek a realization by breaking the "rules".

Since 2009, women in the Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy (NVNA) have been eligible to admit for "Navigation", "Ship Power Plants" and "Electrical Engineers". A large number of professors with skepticism met the decision of the Academic Council of the NVNA. Since 2011, NVNA Academic Council took the decision to abolish the quota principle for admission of male and female candidates. This act of the governing body was aimed at removing the restrictions on willing women to be trained equally with men.

In order to gain a clearer picture of the intentions and moods of women candidates for work on board of merchant ships, we conducted a survey during several additional campaigns. To be more persuasive in their proposal to the applicants, we made the survey together with Education department, which is entirely responsible for conducting the admission campaign, using the interview method.

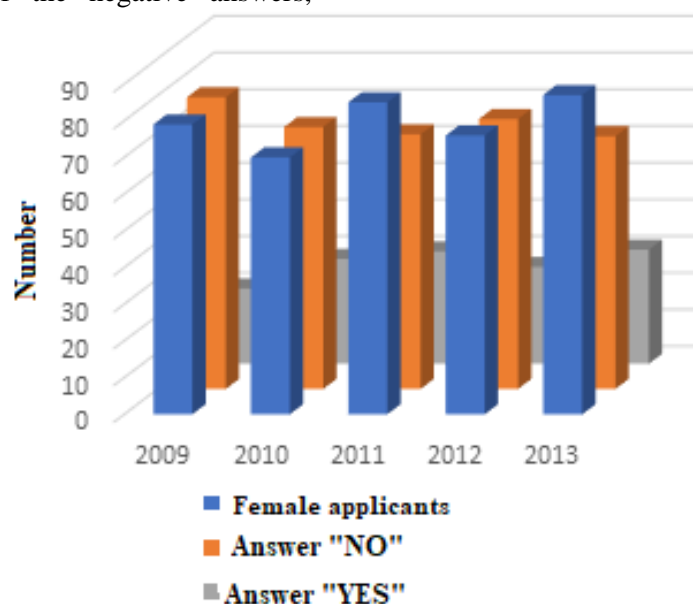
About 400 student applicants were interviewed for 5 years for all specialties who were asked the following questions:

1. Would you apply for a studding in one of the specialties: "Navigation", "Ship Power Plants" and "Electrical Engineers"?
2. If you are admitted to any of the three specialties and successfully graduate in NVNA, would you agree to be employed on merchant shipping?
3. Would you work in a fully male team?

4. Do you think that physically and mentally you can take 4-5 months away from home?  
 5. Do you think you can handle the management of a wholly male team?

The questions required one answer - "YES" or "NO", seeking the firm position of the interviewed. The purpose of the study was to make an initial assessment of women's attitudes towards working and living in a new and unusual environment. In the first year of the survey, an average of 79.5% of respondents gave negative answers. This figure is the starting point for comparing the results of the coming years. The graph in the **Figure 2** shows the percentages of „YES” and “NO” answers. There is a tendency for a slow but lasting reduction of the negative answers,

which, compared to the number of educated students for the respective years, shows a gradual increase in the interest in the studied specialties. The number of admitted women for the period ranges from 1 to 16 in all forms of education - full-time and part-time and bachelor and master's degrees. This shows that many of the positive responses to the questions in the poll have fallen in their choices and have chosen another specialty or another school. Of the 12 graduates, we have information about 5, who are actively sailing and developing as deck officers, engineers and electricians. The survey is made only for Bulgarian students since the admission of foreign students started in 2012.



**Figure 2.** Results of a survey conducted by female applicants for the period 2009-2013  
 Source: Author's survey

Since 2012, foreigners from the EU and third countries are admitted to NVNA for regulated specialties. Initially, the number of applicants was small, but in the last three years, their number exceeded 120 people per year. The results of the admittance by year, specialty and gender are given in **Table 1**. The data in the table shows that the specialty "Navigation" is

the most attractive for women applicants outside Bulgaria. The reason for this is the environmental and working conditions of merchant shipping. The lack of noise and the dirty environment of the ship's bridge is a much more attractive condition for a woman than a ship's engine room, even on a state-of-the-art ship.

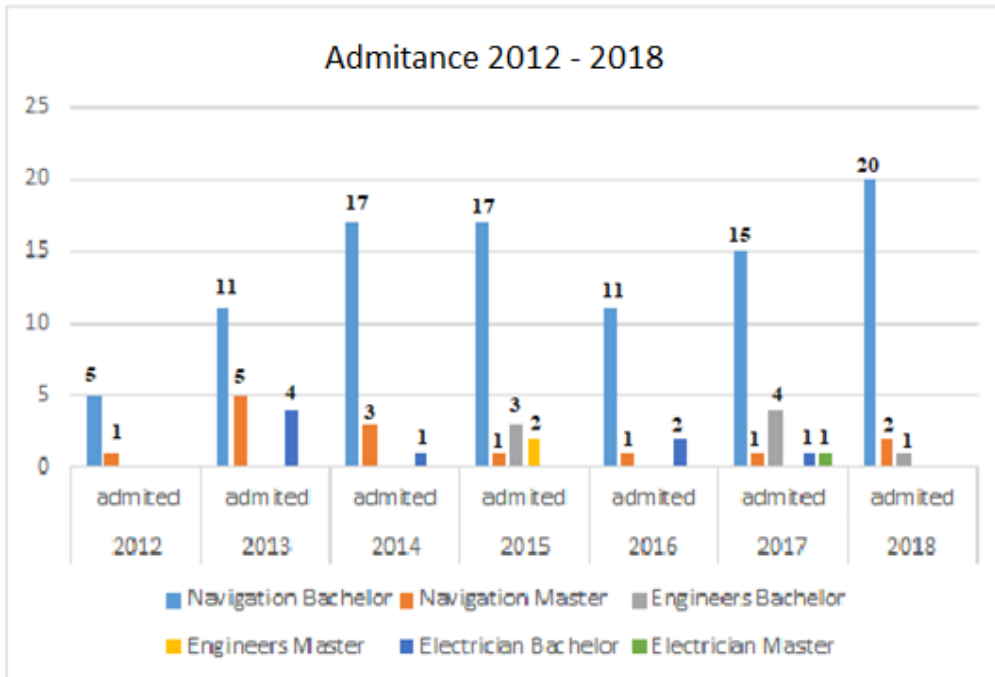
**Table 1.** Number of admitted foreign students in NVNA per year

Specialty	Gender	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Navigation	Male	6	12	27	44	48	91	92
	Female	0	0	1	10	7	6	9
Ship Power Plants	Male	0	0	0	0	0	0	49
	Female	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy Education Department

The opening of the NVNA for women in so-called regulated specialties (Navigation, Ship Power Plants and Electrical Engineers) has increased the interest of the applicants. This is very well observed in the Education Department data for the last 7 years - from 2012 to 2018 inclusive. This statistic does not account for the number of interrupted students but is nonetheless sufficiently representative and exhaustive.

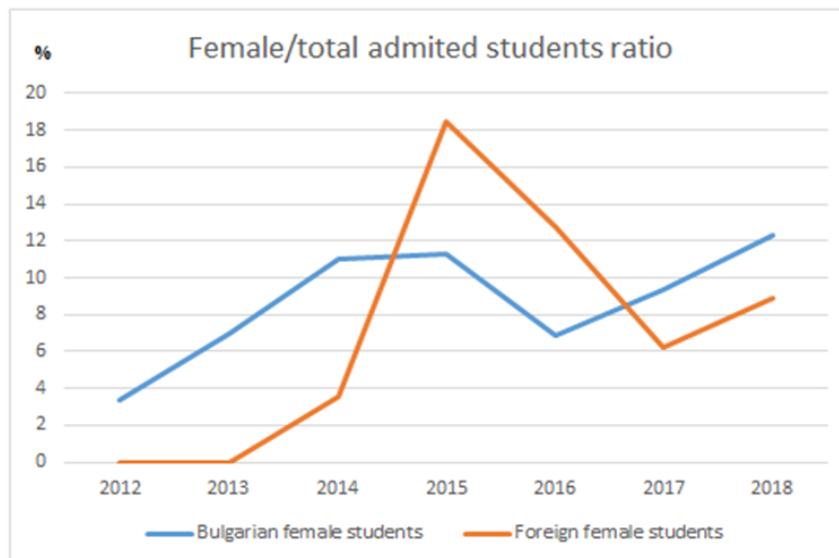
**Figure 3** clearly shows the women persistent interest in seafaring professions. There is a growing interest in the "Navigation" specialty, probably because of the idea that the captain's position is more prestigious and more appropriate to a woman. On the other hand, engineering professions are avoided by women due to the need for a special attitude towards purely theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, physics, mechanics, and electrical engineering.



**Figure 3.** Number of admitted Bulgarian female students in NVNA for the period 2012 – 2018  
Source: Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy Education Department

The comparison between foreign students and Bulgarian ones shows that the relative number

of female applicants is approximately the same **(Figure 4).**



**Figure 4.** Ration between admitted Bulgarian and foreign female students and total admitted students for the period 2012 – 2018

Source: Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy Education Department

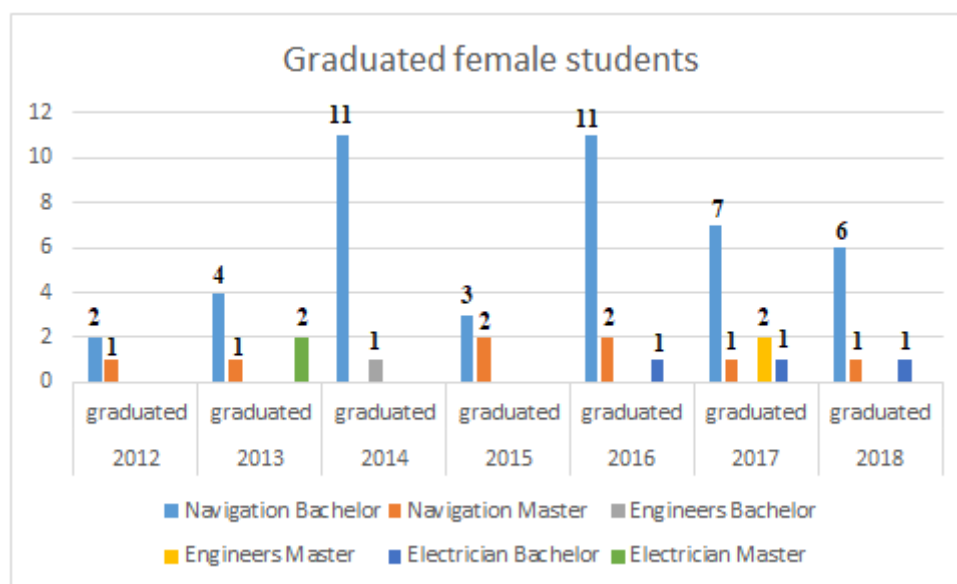


However, there is a difference in the number of graduates. Unlike Bulgarian female students, all foreign female students complete their education. Finding a job in shipping companies is a serious motivation, which is not an obstacle for graduated Greek women.

**Figure 5** shows that the number of graduated Bulgarian female students is much smaller than that of the admitted women. The reasons are

different. The most serious reasons for disappointment are:

- still existing attitudes of the recruitment companies openly refuse to hire women in the crews of their merchant ships.
- awareness of the difficulties of the ship's life.
- sexual comments, sexual invitations and unwanted physical contact on board.



**Figure 5.** Number of graduated Bulgarian female students in NVNA for the period 2012 – 2018  
Source: Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy Education Department

The registered in the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy of the Republic of Bulgaria companies for recruitment of maritime specialists are 86 (18). However, 21 only are the most active on the labor market for seafarers for commercial shipping. The statistics of women employed by the above-mentioned companies are too scarce and therefore difficult to trace their realization. Future research on this topic will highlight the employment rate of women in the sector and the problems faced by both sides in the process.

## CONCLUSION

The admission and training system at NVNA is wide open to all students who wish to study in positions, related to the maritime industry. In order to promote Bulgarian maritime education, professors from the Academy have been involved in various international projects focusing on gender equality in the shipping. A comprehensive review of the data from the admission campaign for each academic year from 2012 to the present shows that, for the unregulated specialties, “Maritime Transport

Management”, “Port Operations” and “Logistics”, there are many more female applicants.

The study shows the gradual overcoming of conservative perceptions about the role of women in shipping. The growing number of candidates for the “Navigation”, “Ship Power Plants” and “Electrical Engineer” creates a competitive environment on a completely new basis - the ability of women to work equally with men in a previously purely male profession.

For the researched 7 years, the number of admitted women is 129 and the number of graduated is 60. The number of graduates does not include those admitted in the last 4 years. They are still students. Their number is 82 and, upon successful graduation, they will change the image of the industry.

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