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FROM THE LECTURE HALL TO THE DECK: PSYCHOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF FEMALE CADETS ON THEIR FIRST VOYAGE

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Abstract: Maritime universities today proudly showcase a growing number of female students training to become officers. However, the real test does not happen in the simulator room. It hits during that very first voyage. Moving from a familiar university campus to a commercial vessel in the middle of the ocean is a massive culture shock. Academies do a great job teaching ship stability and navigation, but female cadets often step on board feeling unprepared for the emotional toll. They face unique and often unspoken pressures like deep social isolation, the stress of adapting to life at sea, and the heavy burden of constantly proving themselves in a male-dominated environment. This paper argues that technical know-how is no longer enough to guarantee a successful start. To truly support these young women, maritime education needs to address the human element.

Key words: Female cadets, Maritime education, Psychological resilience, Soft skills, First voyage adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Walking through the corridors of a maritime university today looks very different than it did a couple of decades ago. You see young women heading to classes with backpacks and course notes just like any other college students, but with their sights set on building careers on giant container ships, tankers, or luxury cruises. International bodies like the IMO push hard for gender equality, and universities are genuinely proud of their diverse enrollments. But getting a civilian diploma and passing simulator exams is only half the battle.

The real test begins the moment a student steps onto the deck of a commercial ship for their very first voyage as a cadet. Imagine being twenty years old, thousands of miles from home, and stepping into a closed metal environment where you might be the only woman among a crew of twenty or thirty men. The safety bubble bursts immediately.

Suddenly, knowing how to flawlessly calculate the stability of a cargo vessel does not help you figure out how to deal with a traditional chief mate who doubts your abilities simply because of your gender.

This paper will take a closer look at that exact transition. We will explore the psychological shock of the first voyage. Female cadets face a unique set of challenges that go far beyond ordinary homesickness. We will analyse the reality of deep social isolation and the unspoken pressure of representation. Often, a female cadet feels that if she makes a simple mistake, she is not just a junior making a learning error. She feels like she is proving a harmful stereotype right.

Maritime universities are fantastic at producing highly skilled civilian navigators and engineers. But there is a glaring blind spot. We spend hundreds of hours teaching students how to handle cargo operations, fires, and emergency procedures. Yet, we spend almost zero hours teaching them how to manage emotional burnout, or how to set professional boundaries in a confined space.

However, this paper is not about pointing out flaws. We will discuss how universities can evolve their curriculum by integrating practical psychological preparation. We will explore the benefits of introducing mandatory soft skills training, focusing heavily on emotional intelligence and conflict resolution.

The ultimate goal of this research is clear. If we want these young women to stay in the commercial maritime industry and eventually become captains or chief engineers, we need to give them the right tools. We need to prepare their minds just as rigorously as we prepare their technical skills.

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1.1 Motivation for choosing the topic

The motivation for this research stems from a persistent "diversity paradox" within the maritime industry: the disconnect between the successful campaigns to enroll young women in maritime universities and the harsh reality of shipboard life that often drives them to leave the industry early.

I chose this topic to investigate why the commercial vessel, during the crucial first voyage, often functions as an environment of social isolation rather than a space for professional integration.

Furthermore, this paper aims to move beyond the simplistic debate of telling young women to simply "toughen up" in a male-dominated field. By acknowledging the demanding technical realities of the sea while using sociological and psychological frameworks to highlight the risks of hyper-visibility and emotional burnout, I hope to provide a balanced analysis.

Ultimately, the goal is to show that improving female retention in the global fleet requires a transition from purely technical training to a system that actively addresses the human element and psychological preparedness.

1.2 Research objectives

The primary goal of this research is to analyze the tension between the rigorous technical preparation provided by maritime academies and the glaring lack of psychological support for female cadets. To achieve this, the paper pursues the following objectives:

O1. Analyse the Culture: To examine the deeply ingrained social dynamics and unwritten rules of the commercial shipping environment, specifically focusing on how gender biases operate in confined spaces.

O2. Evaluate the Psychological Impact: To investigate how the first voyage affects the mental well-being of female cadets, utilizing concepts such as "hyper-visibility" and the "burden of representation" to understand emotional exhaustion.

O3. Propose Solutions: To identify the key elements of an updated educational paradigm, such as mandatory soft skills training, emotional intelligence modules, and mentorship programs that are essential for a successful and sustainable career at sea.

1.3 Working hypotheses

H1. While maritime universities excel at providing the necessary technical and navigational training, the complete absence of structured psychological preparation leaves female cadets highly vulnerable to social isolation and early career burnout.

H2. The commercial shipboard environment acts as a magnifying glass for gender dynamics; rather than blending in as junior trainees, female cadets experience a state of "hyper-visibility" that forces them to constantly overcompensate.

H3. There is a significant implementation gap between international policies promoting maritime diversity and the actual curriculum taught in universities, rendering these diversity goals fragile unless supported by concrete emotional and psychological training.

2. THE SHOCK OF THE FIRST VOYAGE (EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY)

Getting accepted for that first cadetship contract is a huge milestone. For a female maritime student, it feels like the ultimate reward after years of studying intense technical subjects. The bags are packed, the medical checks are cleared, and everyone back home is incredibly proud. But the moment she boards and the heavy steel doors close, the commercial vessel stops being a theoretical concept. It becomes a massive, isolated industrial plant, and the safety net of the university is completely gone.

The hardest part of this transition is rarely the actual work. Universities do a brilliant job preparing students for the gruelling shifts, the deafening engine noise, or the stress of a navigational watch.

Instead, the true shock is overwhelmingly social and psychological. When a young woman steps on board a commercial ship, she rarely blends in. She stands out immediately, whether she wants to or not.

This specific dynamic is actually a well-documented issue in modern maritime sociology. Dr. Momoko Kitada, a leading expert from the World Maritime University, has written extensively about the unique shipboard culture that female seafarers face. According to her studies, women at sea often live in a state of "hyper-visibility" [4].

In simple terms, this means a female cadet is constantly under a microscope. If a male cadet makes a mistake while plotting a route or turning a valve, the crew usually brushes it off as a normal rookie error. However, if a female cadet makes the exact same mistake, it is frequently used as unfair proof that women simply do not belong at sea [5].

Because of this constant spotlight, female cadets experience what sociologists call the "burden of representation." Research conducted by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) points out a painful reality: young women on ships often feel the intense need to work twice as hard just to be considered half as good by their male superiors [8]. The mental energy required to keep up this flawless professional mask every single day is completely exhausting.

Furthermore, we have to remember that a commercial ship is a home for four to six months. The isolation these young women feel is not just about being far from land; it is about feeling socially disconnected from the rest of the crew. The informal culture on board, such as the inside jokes in the mess room or the traditional "boys' club" mentality, can be incredibly lonely for an outsider.

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Even though the International Maritime Organization (IMO) is pushing massive global campaigns to integrate women into the industry [1], the reality on the deck remains tough. This constant state of high alert drains a cadet's emotional batteries long before physical fatigue ever sets in. It creates a massive vulnerability, and unfortunately, it is something our current educational system completely overlooks.

3. THE ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY

In the past, a cadet embarking on their first voyage was truly cut off from the world, with only occasional letters or expensive satellite calls to bridge the gap. For today's generation of female cadets, however, the psychological landscape has shifted due to digital connectivity. While the physical isolation on board remains a reality, the ability to access "digital lifelines" has become a vital survival mechanism.

When a female cadet feels the weight of "hyper-visibility" or faces a difficult social interaction on deck, her first instinct is often to reach out to her peers, such as other female students or junior officers who are undergoing the exact same experience.

Whether it is through dedicated WhatsApp groups, Instagram communities, or forums, these digital spaces provide a "psychological safe zone." In these networks, cadets can vent their frustrations and realize that their struggles are not personal failures, but systemic challenges shared by many others. This peer validation is often the only thing that prevents a cadet from quitting during a particularly tough first month.

However, this digital connection is a double-edged sword. Research into maritime mental health suggests that while social media provides support, it can also increase the feeling of "FOMO" (fear of missing out) and intensify homesickness by constantly showing the contrast between a cadet's industrial reality and her friends' normal lives back home [7].

4. EVOLVING THE PARADIGM: SOFT SKILLS AND MENTORSHIP AS ANCHORS OF RESILIENCE

If the industry truly wants to retain female talent, the conversation must shift from simply getting women on board to ensuring they thrive once they are there. This requires an evolution in the maritime educational paradigm. Universities must expand their focus beyond technical proficiency and begin treating psychological preparedness as a critical safety requirement.

To bridge the gap between the safe lecture hall and the harsh reality of the deck, two strategic solutions stand out:

- the formal integration of soft skills training
- the establishment of structured mentorship programs.

First, "soft skills" should no longer be viewed as optional corporate buzzwords, but rather as essential survival tools in a confined environment. A female cadet needs to be explicitly taught how to set firm professional boundaries, how to de-escalate interpersonal conflicts, and how to protect her mental health when facing subtle biases.

Incorporating modules on emotional intelligence and stress management directly into the mandatory university curriculum would give young women the vocabulary and the confidence to handle the "burden of representation" without internalizing the stress. According to organizational psychologists, equipping workers in isolated environments with emotional regulation techniques drastically reduces early career burnout [6].

Second, universities possess a massive, untapped resource: their own returning students. One of the most effective ways to combat the profound isolation of the first voyage is to establish a female-to-female mentorship pipeline. An academic program that pairs a second-year student who is about to leave for her first contract with a fourth-year student who has recently returned from sea would be transformative.

Guidelines developed by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) highly recommend mentoring networks for female seafarers, noting that shared experiences demystify shipboard life and provide a crucial psychological safety net [3].

Through these university-facilitated connections, a departing cadet learns the unwritten rules of the ship not through painful trial and error, but through the guidance of someone who has successfully navigated the exact same waters.

Ultimately, by pairing world-class technical education with mandatory psychological preparation, we can equip the next generation of female officers with both the navigational tools to cross the oceans and the emotional compass to build lasting, successful careers at sea. Providing this support is the only way to ensure that a woman's first voyage marks the beginning of a lifelong journey, rather than a reason to leave the industry.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis shows that, for female cadets, the first voyage is primarily a social and psychological test rather than a technical one. The arguments presented support the three working hypotheses: maritime universities provide solid technical training but little structured psychological preparation (H1); the shipboard environment exposes female cadets to hyper-visibility and to the burden of representation, which leads to constant overcompensation and emotional exhaustion (H2); and international policies promoting gender diversity are not yet matched by corresponding content in the curriculum (H3). Although the STCW framework [2] already includes elements of personal safety and

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social responsibility, these are treated briefly and do not address the specific pressures faced by women in predominantly male crews.

Digital peer networks currently act as an informal support mechanism, but they cannot replace institutional preparation. The paper therefore recommends two measures that maritime universities can implement within existing programmes: mandatory soft skills modules focused on emotional intelligence, stress management, conflict de-escalation and professional boundary setting, and a structured mentorship programme pairing cadets preparing for their first contract with senior students recently returned from sea. Future research should test these proposals empirically, through surveys and interviews with female cadets before and after their first voyage, in order to measure their effect on well-being and retention.

6. CREdit authors statement

Conceptualization: G.D.-I., R.I.D.; Data curation: not applicable; Formal analysis: G.D.-I.; Funding acquisition: not applicable; Investigation: G.D.-I.; Methodology: G.D.-I., R.I.D.; Project administration: R.I.D.; Resources: G.D.-I.; Software: not applicable; Supervision: R.I.D.; Validation: R.I.D.; Visualization: not applicable; Writing – original draft: G.D.-I.; Writing – review & editing: G.D.-I., R.I.D..

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