Women seafarers as minority organizational members

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Abstract Women constitute a minority among employees on merchant cargo ships [1]. There is an existing body of research concerning women as minorities in several industries, for example, in engineering [2] and police [3]. Less is written, though, concerning women at sea in the perspective of the organizational context they enter into when becoming ship operational personnel. This paper explores questions from organizational perspectives, based on the interviews with 15 men and women working in the maritime industry in Norway. A significant part of a ship’s organizational context lies in its status as a total institution [4] in which people work as well as reside, and where organizational members are cut off from the outside world for periods of time. Within this organizational context, how do women as “others” [5] find their place and what challenges do they seem to encounter? The paper also argues whether the presence of women potentially may create a type of disorder which might disrupt the existing male-dominated organizational culture [6]. Gender becomes sensitive within a shipboard workplace where a total institution is particularly vulnerable when it comes to possible disordering effects created by “otherness”. In order to illuminate these research questions the paper looks at how women create their gender identities [7] on board as well as expectations from fellow employees concerning their identity enactment. It appears that organizational humour, language and cultural artefacts are important aspects in analyzing the situation of women as minority members in a total institution. Finally, the paper reflects upon the seeming organizational silence within the maritime industry concerning women as minority organizational members. The research suggests the necessity of leader/captain acknowledgement of organizational cultural issues emphasizing gender. Such an acknowledgement could be looked upon as positive means of recruiting and retaining women as ship operational personnel.

Keywords: women seafarers, minority issues, total institution, cultural disorder, identity, behavioural rules, leadership awareness

1. Introduction

Women constitute a marked minority among the world’s maritime work force. Figures estimate women constituting 1 or 2 % of the total seafaring work force [8]. According to the ILO study in 2003, the number of women differs between different countries, from Sweden (23.3 %) to Italy (1.2%). In Norway, where this study is situated, it was reported that a female participation of seafaring was approximately 10 % [9]. It is not unreasonable to assume that these numbers have grown in favour of more women entering to the industry since 2003. The more recent study published in 2011 explains that women represent 1.07% at deck officer level and 0.28% at engine officer level among the six countries of Bulgaria, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, and UK [10]. Hence, it is appropriate to argue that the maritime sea-based industry lags behind most business areas when it comes to female participation.

This general lack of gender balance in the industry is a worldwide issue. Nonetheless, the scope of this paper is limited to a glimpse into the Norwegian sea-based maritime business. Norway’s maritime sector might be a particularly interesting study object since Norway is known as – and like to portray itself as – a country where gender balance is a goal in multiple parts of society including work life. Another research interest in this paper is to shed light upon women seafarers on cargo vessels as minority members of an organizational culture. This approach is to bring forward knowledge of circumstances that might be essential to an understanding of issues concerning being “different” within a work environment. Such questions become emphasized by the fact that a sea-based work environment is

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more than a mere work environment – it is also an environment where organizational members spend their leisure time in what Goffman calls a total institution [11].

The focus of our study is to explore into being “different” and being “the others” when it comes to gender and gender identity in a male-dominated environment. The paper will look into some of the critical questions: (1) What challenges in such a situation might pose for individual women seafarers as well as an organizational culture on board a ship?; (2) What expectations do women seafarers encounter from both themselves and their fellow employees?; and (3) Is there any way in which the presence of women might create some form of organizational and cultural “disorder” that can be challenging for everyone involved? Finally, the paper will reflect upon the seeming organizational and industry silence concerning these issues.

2. Being a minority in the workplace

The term, ‘minority’ is used in different contexts with reference to, for example, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, disease, social class, locality, and nationality. These attributes are often intersectional and present a complex community space that they belong. For example, African American women fire-fighters have at least two factors to be categorised as a minority, that are being African American; and being women. The research shows that African American women fire-fighters experienced discriminations because of their two elements [12] [13].

There are a number of studies on minority women in the workplace, such as police [14], Navy [15], carpenters and engineers [16]. The common claim as a minority group of women in such traditionally male-dominated workplaces is gender-related challenges and cultural biases. A stereotyping against women in physically demanding jobs or high-risk occupations is likely to imply that women cannot perform as well as men do. It results in the situation where women have to prove their competencies even better than their male counterparts. The study into the occupational culture of engineering shows that women had to work hard and suppress emotions to ‘become one of the guys’ [17].

The case of women seafarers is similar to the above-mentioned stream of research, however only a limited number of literature is available. Some of the completed studies focus on female cadets rather than women who actually repeat a cycle of signing on and off aboard ships. Though maritime education and training (MET) plays an important role in introducing women into seafaring professions, voices from women seafarers who know the reality of work life should be heard much more intensively. The knowledge that women seafarers have created would be a useful source of feedback to improve a strategy of encouraging female cadets to go to sea.

3. Ship as a total institution

With a number of reasons, seafaring is a unique occupation which accommodates a specific work culture and environment for both men and women. Shipboard life is still contained in modern shipping where the number of crew is smaller, typically 17 seafarers on a vessel, and very little free time is allocated both at sea and in port. Seafarers work and live in the same limited space to share. Their onboard life is extremely routinized and scheduled. It is a total institution, as Goffman theorizes [18], which exercises absolute control over seafarers’ onboard lives, including their behaviour and language.

One aspect of ship as a total institution will be the presence of hegemonic masculinity. A hierarchical structure on board a ship, a Captain behaves like a father of his crew which resembles a classic norm of patriarchy [19]. Shipboard organizations are gendered in terms of the way seafarers’ identities are constructed. Hegemonic masculinity is symbolically positioned on board ships within discourses that produce and reproduce gendered operation of work within the organizational culture. Such positioning is problematic when women enter seafaring professions as their ‘difference’ may create a disordered orgasm within the ship organization. Geldalof [20] implies this phenomenon as ‘tensions between locatedness and dislocation are played out through both discursive representations of ‘Woman’ and the
activities of women’, hence the narratives of women’s identity repeatedly position ‘Woman’ as ‘place’. This notion matches the understanding of onboard organizational culture where the majority is men; and the minority women if there is a woman on board - and even so, she will be considered to be in a ‘wrong’ place which is not common for women at all. In this setting where the absence of femininity is evident, it may be a challenge for women to be a part of the crew unless they choose to be ‘one of the boys’.

Culture determines what the appropriate behaviours are for men and women in the context of organizations [21]. The impact of ship’s culture has been observed in women seafarers’ lives in various ways. Kitada's [22] research exhibits how women seafarers tend to develop their identity management strategies over time. 'Sameness' strategies are typically employed when women enter a man's world of seafaring work, for example, they attempt to hide their feminine qualities by wearing buggy clothes and without much make-up. In a more intensified format, some women decide to adopt masculine behaviour, such as swearing to present themselves as one of the boys. 'Difference' strategies are, on the other hand, not to compromise their behaviour to a masculine way of decision-making and practices, but rather to stick to their own best way. The study reveals that this process of women's identity management is being affected by the seafaring culture.

4. Methods

This study is based in 15 in-depth interviews with men and women working in the maritime industry in Norway. The interviews were conducted in 2013 – 2014 and took place as explorative semi-structured interviews with the main intention of looking for possible barriers for female participation in the sea-based maritime industry. The interviewed persons all have experience from the sea for longer or shorter periods. Some of them are at present ship operational personnel, some are working in land-based maritime positions.

From this limited data material it is not possible to generalize any results. When we nevertheless will argue that our data constitutes a valid basis for an analysis of women seafarers’ organizational life, we build upon a long tradition of the value of qualitative case studies within the organizational sciences [23]. We hence look upon our informants’ stories as valuable information in order to illuminate women seafarers’ position as minority members in a sea environment.

The goal of this research is to try to understand the contextual dynamics that take place within this organizational setting. Analyses of the data material allow us to gain knowledge concerning organizational traits that seem vital for an understanding of gender minority issues aboard a ship. Although the study is set within a Norwegian context, it is our hope that our findings and discussions will be of interest not only for a Norwegian audience but also for the international maritime industry as women seafarers in a minority organizational position are found all over the world.

5. Women seafarers – one of the boys?

Several researchers have studied work life from the perspective of women as minority organizational members. It seems that regardless of occupation and culture, certain general organizational traits can be found when women enter into work domains dominated by men. The study conducted by Kvande discusses the construction of femininities in engineering organizations [24]. In line with other writers, Kvande finds it significant for women when entering the engineering business to become “one of the boys”, to become a ‘social man’.

One of our female informants says:

“On my first ship, I was met with skepticism and given a rough time … I felt I was tested out more than the men were. I don’t think there should be different expectations for women.”
Kvande discusses the dilemmas facing women when negotiating their status and identity in male-dominated organizational contexts. She utilizes the concepts of “sameness” and “difference” to illuminate possible strategic choices women hold when entering into such work domains. Our research interest is whether women seafarers are obliged to become “one of the boys” or whether it is an option to choose “difference” as a strategy:

“I have seen one woman who came on board and the first thing she did was to enter the crew quarters and remove the pictures of lightly dressed women from the walls. She didn’t want such pictures at her place of work. But was this necessary? By the way, she didn’t last long on the ship,” a female first officer told.

This female officer apparently chose the strategy of being “different” without much success and understanding in the work environment. Is it easier to accept “sameness” and become “one of the boys” in order to become accepted and achieve a good working life on board? Our data suggest that this might be the case.

Also, the minority position may lead to a struggle for seafaring women to prove themselves competent in order to gain respect from their colleagues [25] [26]. Due to this position and the following high organizational visibility, women tend to look upon themselves as symbols of their gender, and this “proving” of capabilities is not an uncommon feature of “the others”. Both authors point to how women on board have to prove their worth to become accepted and respected as co-workers. These statements are shared by our informants:

“It is wrong – and probably not uncommon – to have special demands and expectations concerning job performance towards women seafarers”, argued one informant, a female first officer.

“A woman would have to be extremely competent ... to do all tasks in an almost perfect manner. I guess a strong woman could survive in such a work environment”, a male shipping company administrator stated.

Conclusively so far, it seems the female minority position induces special work demands couples with a need for mental and social strength in order to be fully accepted by their male colleagues.

6. Women’s “otherness” seen from an organizational perspective

Gherardi and Poggio [27] discuss the “otherness” situation experienced by female employees in a predominantly male work, and their research is much in line with what Kvande [28] and also our study has shown: It seems to be expected that women take on a “sameness” identity in order to become integrated into the work environment. What also is explored in Gherardi and Poggio’s [29] work is a possible explanation for why this generally seems to be the case: Is it viable to argue that women’s entry into male-dominated workplaces in itself may undermine traditions? Research by Alvesson and Billing [30] echoes this question in their discussion of how beliefs and values concerning what is “natural” and legitimate ways of behaviour and language are set within the organizational culture. In line with other researchers, they argue that a stable organizational situation may become somewhat shattered when “others” enter.

Is it then viable to argue that the entering of “others” into maritime work environments – consciously or unconsciously – may provoke skepticism or even resistance towards female participation? And will the male organizational culture be “defended” by for example the use of coarse language and sexual comments in which women as a group are targeted? The mentioned authors argue that female employees instinctively may try to “solve” this complex situation by seeking more or less to conceal their gender identity in order to prevent conflicts and leave the male gender culture alone.
Thomas’ research from a maritime environment underlines these arguments by showing that women seafarers have to accept sexual jokes and language while they simultaneously are expected to downplay their femininity for example in the way they dress when being off duty. We find it legitimate to argue that when fulfilling such incongruent expectations, women’s gender enactment contributes to preserving the existing male-dominated organizational culture. From this perspective, Gherardi and Poggio’s affirmative answers to the cited questions along with Thomas’ and Alvesson and Billing’s observations constitute valuable organizational perspectives to shed light on women’s position on board a ship. As an analytical tool, it helps us to comprehend that possible male skepticism and expectations towards female colleagues at times has less to do with a dislike and discrimination of women but more to do with a dislike of something – here: women seafarers – threatening the stability of their organizational culture.

Our informants support this reflection by their shared perception of change in the maritime work environment if women become part of the crew:

“It makes a difference when women are employed on board. It has to do with how you behave ... sometimes life on a ship can be almost childish when it comes to language use and nonsense with only men present ... you have to speak in a different manner when there are women”, a male captain argued.

“The conversations become different, both in style and content when women come into the work environment”, a female first officer maintained.

Conclusively so far, it seems fair to argue that the organizational culture enters a change phase when women become employees on board. For some organizational members, this will be positively received, while others will regret the cracks in their up-to-then stable board culture.

7. Female sexuality as the ultimate disordering element?

It was unexpected for us to find that quite a few of our informants talked about sexuality on board when describing women’s positions as minority organizational members. This theme was not part of our initial research topic, but it proved to become important due to informants’ reflections. Based on the information of sexuality’s “presence” on board, it is rather interesting to find that few – to our knowledge – academic writers have been occupied with this subject. One exception is the Swedish ethnographer, Ingrid Kaijser who discusses sexuality on board by utilizing the categories “visible”, “secret” and “invisible”. Even though the categorizing of sexual behaviour is not a theme of our analysis, Kaijser’s work is important to us in the way it acknowledges that sexuality can be found on board a ship.

Our findings point to specific behavioural expectations regarding female sexuality in order to protect the organizational order on board from unwanted disruptions. Such behavioural expectations are argued by both women and men among our informants and are widely shared among these. The activation of female sexuality seems to be the utmost example of how women’s gender enactment may threaten the stability and culture of a ship’s work environment.

“There have been situations where sexual relations have developed between men and women on board. Then maybe jealousy has developed.... That is maybe why they say that women should not work at sea”, a male captain maintained.

A female first officer told about the advice she had given to a young female seafarer:

“What do you consider wise behaviour if you want to be respected as a colleague and nothing else? Do you think you ought to sun-bathe at the swimming pool wearing a bikini?"

A former male captain, now a shipping administrator, put it this way:
“It is mainly the women who are in charge of this sexual play. It is their responsibility to decide their behaviour. Then they must understand the consequences if they …”

The same informant talked about a fellow captain, now retired:

“He didn’t want to have women on board. He wanted peace. He knew what it could mean to have …”

Other informants claimed that women’s age is important when it comes to sexuality and life on board. One of the interviewed male captains remarked that captains might prefer women seafarers to be more or less middle-aged, because:

“… young girls can’t handle all the attention they get … at sea for weeks and months”.

When analyzing our data material, it is quite obvious that the responsibility for sexual behaviour on board is placed upon the female minority, and indeed accepted by the women as well. In general, it seems that women are expected to conceal parts of their female identity while on board in order not to raise emotional and sexual tensions among their male colleagues. Such tensions within the life of a total institution may be very harmful for the necessary organizational stability, it is claimed by many of our informants.

8. Women seafarers as minority organizational members: A silent topic?

Based on well-known leadership literature in which organizational culture is discussed (for example Schein) [36], it would not be unreasonable to imagine that the challenges of integrating minority organizational members into the work environment would be a topic of systematic leadership attention within the maritime industry. Our informants were asked about the state of the art concerning this, but none of them could remember any occasions in which issues concerning women seafarers had been formally discussed, neither on their ships nor generally in the industry.

“I don’t know whether we will put this on our agenda … I have to acknowledge that this is not something we have been concerned with,” said a male shipping administrator when asked if women seafarers was an organizational topic of interest.

“The maritime industry is not occupied with the existing gender imbalance and what this possibly might mean for the few women on board,” another male administrator maintained.

After having told several stories involving women and sexuality on board, a former captain, now administrator, said:

“What I talk about now is something we do not openly talk about … but I do hear some stories which are quite sad. But these stories mostly stay on board, they do not often come to our knowledge at shore”.

It is important to emphasize that the informant did not talk about sexual abuse, but rather of situations in which women seafarers in his opinion had not taken proper responsibility for avoiding that sexual relations had developed. His phrasing leads us to suggest that in his company, taboos existed concerning openness about what sexuality might mean both for individuals and for life in general within the total institution of the ship.

Our informants confirm that organizational discussions about the minority position of women seafarers are not to be found on the formal agenda. When they at the same time are occupied with organizational culture issues and the work environment on board, it seems viable to point to an interesting paradox in their approach: Through the silence concerning women as minority members, it becomes difficult to address the organizational challenges of having employed someone (i.e. women) who are different from
the mainstream male employee. The challenges are similar to those found in other gender-imbalanced industries and they do not disappear if they are looked upon as non-existing, not of interest or even as taboos.

9. Conclusion

The Norwegian maritime industry – and the maritime industry in general – have to decide whether it will be a future business strategy to employ and retain more women seafarers. If the answer to this question is positive, then our paper has come forward with knowledge that we believe is vital for the successful implementation of such a strategy.

In this paper, we have shown that to be part of a minority group at a workplace can be challenging both for the individual and for the organization. Women seafarers’ experience of being a minority is not personal but common in such work organizations. Hence, this paper has extensively provided the evidence of advantages of approaching this situation as an organizational rather than an individual issue. By doing so, the individual responsibility of behaving like “one of the boys” will be lifted from the women seafarers, and their male colleagues will be relieved from the individual responsibility of trying to act well-intentioned within organizational processes of which they – quite naturally – have limited knowledge. From this, we find it vital that maritime organizations acknowledge the challenge and responsibility following from having minority members as part of their work stock at sea. On the contrary, such an acknowledgment will be misleading if it merely focuses on existing poor practice. What it needs to give attention is rather a lack of knowledge concerning what it means to be part of a minority in any workplace.

This research highlights silence rather than words that distinguishes the way in which the maritime industry copes with the topic of women seafarers and their minority position. In fact, key participants who referred to the existing organizational minority challenges in this work are the local leaders – i.e. the sailing captains. If the industry wants to hire and retain more women on their ships, it is vital in our opinion to end the silence and openly talk about and discuss issues like the ones we have commented upon in this paper. Such a discussion does not suggest that the industry or individuals are to blame for the present situation. To the contrary, it suggests that improvements for the benefit of the industry have to include open discussions without some topics being looked upon as taboos.

Lastly, it is our concern that little research has been done concerning women seafarers as minority organizational members. It is our conviction that more research within this field will contribute to broader knowledge about a topic that is strategically important in the future of the maritime industry.

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References