



Guiding Spirit to Shipping Industry

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## Women battle bevy of odds to book their berth in ship sailing career

**R**edeeming the pledge on increasing women tribe numbers from measly 2 per cent in the global sailing industry, International Women Seafarers Foundation (IWSF) has made their high voltage debut on Nov 2017 at Mumbai marking the beginning of a new dawn for women sailors to break the glass ceiling in the crewing industry. In a freewheeling chat with *Sagar Sandesh*, **Ms Sunieeti Bala, Founder, IWSF** expresses shock and awe that out of 1.25 mn seafarers, womenfolk constitute a meager 2 % warranting war footing institutional intervention to set right the gender inequity in the industry. An Extra First Class, Ex-Marine/Class Surveyor & Auditor, DMET (MERI Kolkata) alumni, she opens up about vision, mission and goals of IWSF aimed towards uplifting female cadets' numbers in global sailing industry. Excerpts



Ms Sunieeti Bala, Founder, IWSF

**SS(Sagar Sandesh)- Could you identify some of the broad-based major goals to be accomplished by IWSF in the short and long-term?**

Our short term goals are to assist women seafarer in getting suitable job opportunity by facilitating platform to companies and seafarers to interact, satisfy each other's requirements. Secondly, to provide appropriate Gender sensitization training on a sustained and evolving basis. Thirdly, to guide and mentor young women seafarers embracing the shipping career detailing pros and cons of the journey in maritime sector. As part of long term goals we have envisaged a broad spectrum of action plan including

assisting of companies to bridge policy gaps for women seafarers on board and create awareness; to assist Government and Institutions in promoting education and policies related to women; to promote and assist government in their mission and focus on empowerment of women; increasing visibility and presence of Women Seafarers in the Maritime sector.

**SS- Do you have a well-defined blueprint to enhance Indian womenfolk's participation in seafaring workforce?**

We are preparing this blueprint and to mention some of the themes, I would highlight the salient focus areas of the blueprint viz., to connect with shipping companies, create a pool and understand challenges in hiring women seafarers; to arrange workshops to spread awareness about women in this profession and their active participation; to arrange workshops/seminars on Gender sensitization; to liaise with National and International bodies for women seafarer welfare and policy influencing interactions; to extend -support and Guide sailing women, help them understand and face challenges on board ships and learn to take right steps at right time; to guide and mentor young women seafarers embracing the shipping career during their adventurous journey in the maritime sector.

**SS- Do you really believe maritime industry fulfills the obligation of equal opportunity employer in employing right proportion of women seafarers ?**

So far there are limited number of ship owning and management companies who consider women as suitable workforce for their ships, where majority of such companies do not hire women as their sea going employees. This majorly depend upon the nationality and socio-cultural environment, e.g most companies hailing from Europe regions are generally ok in taking women on board unlike others.

**SS- How do you address work-life balance predicaments of women seafarers?**

Till the time women is sailing onboard, they are not affected by



Ms Sunieeti Bala, Founder, IWSF(second from left) poses for a photo with Dr V Malini Shankar, DG Shipping, following the launch of International Women Seafarers Foundation's (IWSF) promotion pamphlet at Mumbai, recently.

day-to-day worklife balance as she is on duty for her whole contract, and once at home on vacation she is available 24X7 for her near and dear ones, just like any male colleague. However once women comes ashore to work then challenges are very similar to any other shore based employment and naturally it demands a lot from working women.

One of the big challenge faced by women seafarers is that when they are at peak of their career (top four ranks), their biological clock to achieve maternity is giving an alarm. Thus many under family pressures decide to quit sea life and come ashore. On shore there are many job opportunity for them. Recently there has been initiative form Director general of shipping where recruitment rules are changed ,though changes are gender neutral however now more women can look forward to join esteemed Maritime government positions.

**SS- What's your take on workplace**

**apprehensions of passed-out female cadets joining the industry?**

Once a girl passes out with flying colors from MTI, she faces first apprehension while attending campus interviews where limited number of companies approach/ offer them jobs, if at all selected then apprehension about how cooperative, understanding and acceptable will be her future colleagues. In most of the cases a women seafarer have to prove herself at every ship she joins that yes she is as competent, professional and may be more dedicated than her male counterparts in spite of her experience seniority on rank.

**SS- Is male chauvinism a myth or reality in crewing industry?**

Oh yes very much, this profession is male dominated since ages and it is only recently, male seafarers have started seeing women on board as their co-workers .Most of the time male counterparts show their male chauvinism especially those who comes from conservative family backgrounds.



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