Women seafarers on cruiseships

Dr Minghua Zhao, researcher at the Seaferers International Research Centre, looks at how women seafarers have changed the traditional all-male crewing pattern on cruiseships.

The SIRC column

THE growth in world trade and the consequent expansion of world shipping, taken together with the increasing demand of the world seafarers’ labour market in the 1980s and 1990s, has led to a rapid increase in women’s shipboard employment in several specialised sectors. In cruise shipping, women are increasing. This increase in women’s participation in world cruising shipping has fundamentally altered the traditional male division of labour in the cruise sector.

Women are concentrated in “technical” or “non-professional” sectors. Women are doing “men’s work” and women are doing “women’s work”. Certainly, women are occasionally found in management; their number is very small and they are always women from developed countries. Women are also employed as entertainers, beauticians, nurses, aerobic leaders and receptionists and so on; these women, however, tend to be recruited from western Europe or North America. A lot of Filipino women are sometimes found serving at ships’ reception “because of their good English”. Those women serving in cabins, restaurants, bars or utility rooms as stewards, waitresses and cleaners are most likely from south east Asia and eastern Europe.

Nationality is therefore another main factor determining seafarers’ division aboard. Women employed from developed and developing countries have differing motivations in employment, employment history, recruitment and training, employment experiences aboard and future prospects. The former decide to go to sea “to see the world” and “to get to know people from other cultures”. Most of these women are single and have employment histories with high-profile restaurants or hotels before joining the ship. Non-English-speaking women tend to have experience of learning the language in big cities like London or New York. Women in this category chiefly rely on advertising by manning agents or cruise companies for information about job opportunities. When agents are involved, women pay them for the information provided and not for the jobs the information generates.

In most cases, these women are offered a contract for three to six months. Permanent positions are not available unless they are in managerial roles. Most of these women are placed in areas where they have direct contact with passengers. They find the work very hard, but seldom complain because most only intend to stay at sea for one or two years. Most women in this group do not intend to stay at sea unless they have the ambition to develop their careers in other sectors, and see the possibility of doing so.

Women recruited from developing countries take jobs on cruise ships because they find “women’s work” to be more financially rewarding. Many are married with children. They need “high wages” to support their families, albeit the wages are only “high” in comparison with what they can earn in their own countries. Many have to pay manning agents a significant amount to be recruited, and they also have to bear the entire cost of training.

In the later categories, despite women face discrimination in terms of the maximum age limit set against their employment. In the Philippines, for example, the age of 35 is the upper limit on cruiseships is 40; for women it is 29. In addition, many of these women have to pay bond money to the agents or the cruise companies to ensure they meet the full requirement of their employers.

Aboard, the majority of these women are assigned the hardest work and are placed at the bottom of the ship hierarchy in positions such as cabin stewards, waitresses or cleaners. They are discriminated against in many aspects of their work and life aboard, such as assignment of tasks and allocation of living spaces, but most glaringly in wages. For the same positions, women seafarers from develop- ing countries receive much lower wages than women from developed countries. Despite this, these women intend to continue to work on cruiseships. This is because they have a clearly defined goal: to save enough money to enable them to buy their own houses or set up their own land-based businesses.

Women certainly have made advances into the traditionally male maritime world. Indeed, the current situation – the rapid expansion of the fleet as well as the serious shortage of seafarers – makes the world maritime community turn its attention to women seafarers.

The millennium ushers in a new era, with plenty of job opportunities for women. However, to promote women’s full integration into the world seafaring labour force, barriers blocking their access to employment opportunities and factors affecting their working and living conditions must be removed. As in other sectors of shipping, women seafarers on cruise ships must be allowed to have a long battle before they can achieve fair treatment and equality regardless of their gender or nationality.