



Navigating Gender Inequality at Sea: A Phenomenological Study of Female Seafarers' Experiences

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Abstract

Despite increasing global efforts to promote gender equality, the maritime industry remains predominantly male-dominated, with female seafarers continuing to experience barriers that limit their participation, advancement, and inclusion. Understanding these challenges through the lived experiences of women is essential for developing more equitable maritime workplaces. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of eight female seafarers with onboard work experience. Participants were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework to identify recurring patterns and meanings embedded in participants' narratives. Four major themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Gendered Perceptions and Workplace Discrimination, (2) Psychological and Cultural Barriers to Participation, (3) Resilience and Personal Transformation in a Male-Dominated Environment, and (4) Gaps in Institutional Support and Inclusive Workplace Practices. Participants reported experiences of prejudice, stereotyping, limited representation in leadership positions, and organizational practices that failed to address the needs of women. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and determination, often transforming adversity into opportunities for professional and personal growth. Findings also highlighted the need for safer reporting mechanisms, gender-responsive workplace policies, and stronger institutional support systems. Gender inequality remains a persistent concern within maritime workplaces. While female seafarers exhibit remarkable resilience in navigating discrimination and exclusion, sustainable progress requires organizational, cultural, and policy reforms that foster inclusion,

Keywords: female seafarers; gender equality; maritime industry; workplace discrimination; phenomenology; organizational inclusion



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INTRODUCTION

The maritime industry remains one of the most important sectors of the global economy, facilitating international trade and supporting economic development across nations. Despite its critical role in global commerce, the industry continues to be characterized by substantial gender disparities, particularly in seafaring occupations traditionally dominated by men. Although international organizations and maritime stakeholders have increasingly advocated for gender equality and workforce

diversity, the participation of women in seafaring remains significantly limited. According to the International Maritime Organization (IMO, 2024), women comprise only approximately 1% of the global seafaring workforce, highlighting their continued underrepresentation despite decades of initiatives promoting inclusion and equal opportunity.

Historically, maritime work has been socially and culturally constructed as a male profession, reinforcing organizational practices

and workplace norms that often marginalize women. Previous studies have identified a range of barriers that hinder women's participation and advancement in maritime careers, including discriminatory recruitment practices, gender stereotyping, restricted access to leadership positions, unequal career opportunities, workplace harassment, and exclusion from professional networks (Dragomir, 2018; Kitada et al., 2020). These barriers extend beyond employment outcomes and affect workplace experiences, job satisfaction, psychological well-being, professional identity, and long-term career development among women seafarers. Research further suggests that persistent organizational and cultural biases continue to influence perceptions regarding women's competence and suitability for maritime work despite increasing evidence of their technical capabilities and leadership potential (Kitada et al., 2020; Popa et al., 2025).

Recognizing the need to increase women's participation in the maritime sector, international bodies such as the International Maritime Organization have established programs aimed at promoting gender inclusion in maritime education, training, and employment. Through its Women in Maritime Programme, the IMO has continuously advocated for women's empowerment through capacity-building initiatives, professional development opportunities, and support for regional and global women's maritime networks (International Maritime Organization, n.d.). Despite these efforts, the persistence of gender disparities indicates that existing policies and institutional interventions have not fully addressed the structural, cultural, and organizational constraints confronting women at sea. Recent industry reports continue to identify discrimination, bias, and limited career progression opportunities as major obstacles affecting female seafarers worldwide (Global Maritime Forum, 2024).

The growing body of literature on gender in the maritime sector has provided important insights into workforce participation,

representation, and policy implementation. However, much of this scholarship has focused on quantitative measures of employment trends, organizational demographics, and institutional outcomes. Comparatively fewer studies have explored how women personally experience, interpret, and navigate gender inequality within maritime environments. While existing studies have documented the prevalence of challenges faced by women seafarers, limited attention has been devoted to understanding the meanings they assign to these experiences and how such experiences shape their professional identities and career trajectories (Büber & Demirkol, 2026; Kitada et al., 2020). This gap is significant because statistical indicators alone may not adequately capture the complex realities of gender inequality in maritime workplaces.

Understanding gender inequality through the lived experiences of women seafarers is essential for developing more responsive and inclusive policies, workplace practices, and institutional support mechanisms. Women's narratives provide valuable insights into the social realities, organizational conditions, and cultural dynamics that shape their participation in the maritime workforce. Such perspectives can contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that sustain gender disparities as well as the strategies women employ to overcome them. Exploring these experiences is particularly important in an industry striving to promote diversity, inclusion, and equitable access to professional opportunities.

Guided by a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of women seafarers regarding barriers and challenges to gender equality in the maritime industry. Specifically, the study aims to examine how female seafarers experience gender-related obstacles, how these experiences influence their professional participation and career advancement, and how they navigate the social and organizational realities of maritime work. By illuminating the meanings women attach to their experiences, the study contributes to the growing discourse

on gender equality, workforce inclusion, and organizational transformation within the maritime sector. Ultimately, the findings may provide an empirical basis for developing more effective policies, support systems, and institutional strategies that promote equitable participation and career advancement for women in maritime professions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender Inclusion and Representation in the Maritime Industry. Gender equality has become a significant concern within the global maritime sector as policymakers, industry leaders, and international organizations seek to create a more inclusive workforce. Despite increasing attention to diversity initiatives, women remain substantially underrepresented in maritime occupations, particularly in shipboard and leadership positions. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has actively promoted women's participation through its Strategy on the Integration of Women in the Maritime Sector and subsequent initiatives designed to improve education, training, visibility, and professional advancement opportunities for women in maritime professions (International Maritime Organization, 2024).

National maritime agencies have likewise implemented programs aimed at increasing awareness and encouraging women's participation in maritime careers. In the Philippines, the Maritime Industry Authority [MARINA] (2022) has emphasized the importance of supporting female maritime professionals through leadership development activities and advocacy programs aligned with the International Day for Women in Maritime. These efforts reflect a growing recognition that gender diversity contributes not only to social equity but also to organizational effectiveness, innovation, and sustainable workforce development.

Despite these institutional initiatives, gender disparities remain evident throughout the maritime sector. Studies continue to report low rates of female participation in seafaring

occupations, particularly in operational and decision-making positions (IMO, 2024). The persistence of such disparities suggests that formal policies alone may be insufficient to address deeply embedded structural and cultural barriers affecting women in maritime workplaces.

Workplace Barriers and Gender-Based Discrimination. A substantial body of literature identifies workplace discrimination as one of the primary challenges encountered by women in maritime professions. Research has documented that female seafarers frequently encounter unequal treatment, exclusion from professional opportunities, and skepticism regarding their technical competence and leadership capabilities (Kitada, 2020; Ryals, 2023). Such challenges emerge from longstanding assumptions that maritime work is inherently masculine and suited to men.

Several studies emphasize the role of organizational structures in perpetuating these inequalities. Silverio (2024) reported that many commercial vessels continue to lack gender-responsive facilities, including adequate accommodations and sanitary provisions designed for women. The absence of such facilities not only creates physical discomfort but also signals institutional neglect of women's needs in maritime workplaces. Similarly, Brooks and Greenberg (2022) argued that the physically demanding nature of maritime work is often used to reinforce stereotypes that question women's suitability for seafaring careers, despite evidence demonstrating women's competence across various maritime functions.

Gender discrimination also manifests in career advancement opportunities. Women often experience restricted access to leadership positions, mentoring relationships, and professional development opportunities, limiting their long-term career progression (Kitada, 2020). These barriers contribute to lower retention rates, reduced job satisfaction, and a diminished sense of professional belonging among female maritime employees.

Harassment, Psychological Challenges, and Workplace Well-Being. Beyond structural discrimination, women in maritime occupations face psychological and interpersonal challenges that affect their overall workplace experiences. Harassment and gender-based misconduct have been identified as recurring concerns across maritime environments. Pike et al. (2021) emphasized that harassment undermines workplace safety, negatively affects employee well-being, and contributes to the underrepresentation of women within the industry. Such experiences often create hostile work environments that discourage women from remaining in maritime careers.

The nature of maritime work further intensifies these challenges. Prolonged periods at sea, social isolation, irregular work schedules, and physically demanding conditions may increase emotional stress among seafarers (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022). For women, these occupational pressures are frequently compounded by experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and heightened scrutiny from colleagues and supervisors. Consequently, female seafarers often navigate both occupational hardships and gender-specific challenges simultaneously.

Research suggests that the cumulative impact of these experiences may affect women's confidence, career aspirations, and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, many women continue to demonstrate resilience by developing adaptive coping strategies and actively challenging discriminatory workplace norms (Ryals, 2023). Understanding these experiences is critical to developing support mechanisms that promote employee well-being and retention within maritime professions.

Cultural Norms, Stereotypes, and Gendered Maritime Identities. Scholars have consistently identified cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes as significant contributors to women's marginalization in maritime careers. Ozdemir and Albayrak (2019) described the "spillover effect," whereby societal perceptions regarding appropriate gender roles influence

workplace judgments and organizational practices. As a result, women may be subjected to greater scrutiny, lower expectations, and biased performance evaluations compared to their male counterparts.

Language and professional culture also contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality. Kitada et al. (2019) observed that many maritime occupational terminologies historically reflect masculine identities, reinforcing perceptions of shipping and seafaring as male domains. Such linguistic traditions may appear subtle but can shape organizational culture and influence perceptions of professional legitimacy.

The persistence of gender stereotypes extends beyond workplace interactions and reflects broader societal beliefs regarding leadership, physical capability, and occupational suitability. These assumptions often create invisible barriers that affect recruitment, retention, promotion, and workplace inclusion. Consequently, female seafarers frequently find themselves negotiating professional identities within environments where traditional gender expectations remain deeply embedded.

Gender Equality in Coastal and Maritime Communities. Gender inequality within maritime professions reflects broader patterns of gender relations evident throughout fisheries and coastal communities. Torell et al. (2021) found that women in Philippine fishing communities often occupy secondary economic roles, including fish processing and marketing, while men typically perform fishing activities and exercise greater decision-making authority. Similar findings were reported by Solano et al. (2021) in small-scale fishing communities, where women experienced limited access to training, leadership opportunities, and resource management activities.

These studies demonstrate that gender disparities in maritime industries are not isolated workplace issues but are linked to broader social and cultural structures that

influence participation, authority, and access to opportunities. Addressing workplace inequality therefore requires not only organizational reforms but also a deeper understanding of the societal norms shaping women's experiences across maritime sectors.

Theoretical Framework. This study is anchored on Social Role Theory developed by Eagly (1987). Social Role Theory posits that societal expectations regarding appropriate behaviors, responsibilities, and competencies for men and women influence how individuals are perceived and treated within social and organizational settings. These expectations often shape occupational roles, leadership opportunities, and evaluations of professional competence.

Within the maritime industry, Social Role Theory provides a useful lens for understanding the historical perception of seafaring as a masculine occupation. Because maritime work has traditionally been associated with characteristics such as physical strength, authority, and technical expertise, women entering the profession may encounter stereotypes that challenge their perceived suitability for maritime roles. Consequently, female seafarers may face discrimination, limited career opportunities, and increased pressure to demonstrate competence compared with their male counterparts.

At the same time, the theory suggests that changing social expectations and increasing female participation can gradually transform traditional occupational norms. Through their continued presence and professional performance, female seafarers contribute to redefining perceptions of leadership, capability, and gender roles within the maritime sector.

The application of Social Role Theory in this study provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how gendered expectations influence the lived experiences of female seafarers and how these women navigate workplace challenges within a traditionally male-dominated environment.

Research Gap. Existing literature has established that women in maritime professions experience discrimination, workplace barriers, harassment, limited career opportunities, and persistent gender stereotyping (Kitada, 2020; Pike et al., 2021; Ryals, 2023). However, much of the current scholarship has concentrated on workforce participation rates, organizational policies, institutional initiatives, and broad industry trends. While these studies have contributed significantly to understanding gender inequality in maritime contexts, relatively few investigations have explored how female seafarers themselves experience, interpret, and make meaning of these challenges in their daily professional lives.

Furthermore, there remains limited phenomenological research examining the lived experiences of women who continue to navigate male-dominated shipboard environments despite persistent barriers. Understanding these experiences is essential for uncovering the personal, social, and organizational dimensions of gender inequality that may not be captured through quantitative indicators alone. Addressing this gap can provide deeper insights into the realities faced by female seafarers and contribute to the development of more responsive policies, support systems, and inclusive workplace practices within the maritime industry.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of female seafarers regarding barriers and challenges to gender equality in the maritime industry. Phenomenology is an appropriate qualitative approach for examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their experiences within a particular phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The design enabled the researchers to obtain detailed narratives from female seafarers and uncover the underlying meanings associated with their experiences in a male-dominated profession.

Descriptive phenomenology seeks to describe a phenomenon as experienced by individuals while minimizing researcher assumptions and preconceived interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the study aimed to understand how female seafarers experience and navigate gender-related challenges in maritime settings, the phenomenological approach provided a suitable framework for capturing participants' subjective realities and shared meanings.

Participants, Sampling Technique, and Inclusion Criteria. The participants of the study consisted of eight (8) female seafarers who had prior experience working onboard maritime vessels. The selection of participants was guided by the need to obtain rich and relevant information regarding gender-related experiences within maritime workplaces.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was employed. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to select participants who possess direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). While accessibility was considered during recruitment, the primary criterion for participation was firsthand experience as a female seafarer working onboard a vessel.

To ensure the relevance of the collected data, participants met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Must be a female maritime professional.
2. Must have worked onboard a vessel for at least one contract period.
3. Must be willing to participate voluntarily in the study.
4. Must be capable of sharing experiences related to gender equality in maritime workplaces.

Participants who had no shipboard experience or who declined to provide informed consent were excluded from the study.

Consistent with phenomenological research recommendations, a small number of information-rich participants were deemed sufficient to generate meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participant Profile. To provide contextual understanding of the participants while maintaining anonymity, demographic information was gathered during the interview process. The collected profile information included age, rank or position onboard, years of maritime experience, vessel type, and employment sector when applicable. These characteristics provided important background information for interpreting participants' experiences and identifying potential commonalities across narratives.

Table 1
Participant Profile

Participant Code	Age	Rank/Position	Years of Maritime Experience	Vessel Type
P1	35	3 rd officer	9	Container ship
P2	28	2 nd officer	7	Bulk carrier
P3	32	Chief officer	11	Container ship
P4	26	3 rd engineer	5	General cargo
P5	38	3 rd officer	12	MPV
P6	30	Chief engineer	7	Bulk carrier
P7	27	4 th engineer	6	Container ship
P8	28	2 nd officer	5	LNG carrier

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional profile of the participants included in the study. Reporting participant characteristics is recommended in qualitative research because it provides contextual information that assists readers in understanding the backgrounds from which participants' experiences emerged.

The study involved eight female seafarers occupying various shipboard positions and possessing diverse lengths of maritime experience. The variation in age, rank, and professional background enabled the researchers to capture a broad range of perspectives regarding gender equality within maritime workplaces.

To protect participant anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym or participant code, such as Participant 1 (P1), Participant 2 (P2), Participant 3 (P3) throughout the data analysis and reporting process to ensure confidentiality and privacy.

Research Instrument. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview guide, which is widely utilized in phenomenological studies due to its ability to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining alignment with the research objectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interview guide consisted of two sections:

1. Participant demographic information.
2. Open-ended interview questions.

These concerns participants' experiences with gender inequality, workplace discrimination, professional challenges, organizational support, coping mechanisms, and personal reflections as female seafarers.

The semi-structured format provided sufficient flexibility for participants to elaborate on issues they considered meaningful while ensuring that all major areas relevant to the study objectives were explored.

Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent expert validation by a qualified academic professional with research expertise in qualitative inquiry. Recommendations from the validator were incorporated to improve the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the interview questions.

Data Gathering Procedure. Following approval of the research proposal and ethical clearance from the appropriate academic authorities, participant recruitment commenced.

Prospective participants were initially contacted and informed about the objectives, significance, and procedures of the study. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria and expressed willingness to participate were invited to take part in the interview process.

Before each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality measures, potential risks, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Written or electronic consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through virtual platforms, depending on participant availability and location. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of responses. Field notes were likewise maintained to document observations and contextual information relevant to the research process.

Each interview focused on participants' experiences concerning barriers and challenges to gender equality within maritime workplaces. Follow-up and probing questions were utilized when necessary to obtain deeper insights and richer descriptions of participants' lived experiences.

Upon completion of the interviews, audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and prepared for analysis. All collected data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers.

Data Analysis. This study utilized thematic analysis to examine and interpret the qualitative data generated from participant interviews. Thematic analysis is a systematic approach used to identify, organize, analyze, and report recurring patterns or themes within qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The analysis followed six phases adapted from Braun and Clarke (2022):

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data. The researchers repeatedly read and reviewed the interview transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the participants' narratives. Initial observations and reflective notes were documented during this stage.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. Meaningful statements, phrases, and segments related to participants' experiences of gender inequality were identified and assigned preliminary codes. Coding was performed inductively, allowing patterns to emerge directly from the data.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. The generated codes were compared and grouped according to conceptual similarities. Related codes were clustered to form preliminary themes reflecting recurring experiences among participants.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. The preliminary themes were reviewed against the complete dataset to ensure consistency, coherence, and accurate representation of participants' experiences. Themes that overlapped or lacked adequate supporting evidence were revised, combined, or removed.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was carefully refined and clearly defined to capture its essential meaning and contribution to understanding the phenomenon under study.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The final themes were organized into a coherent narrative supported by representative participant quotations. These themes served as the foundation for the presentation of findings and discussion of results.

Trustworthiness of the Study. To enhance the rigor and credibility of the findings, the study adhered to the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated transcript reviews, and participant validation of interview responses whenever possible.

Transferability was established by providing sufficient descriptions of the participants, research context, and data collection

procedures to allow readers to assess the applicability of findings to similar contexts.

Dependability was enhanced through maintaining an audit trail that documented important methodological decisions, data collection activities, coding processes, and theme development procedures.

Confirmability was achieved through reflexive note-taking and systematic documentation of analytical procedures to minimize researcher bias and ensure findings were grounded in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical principles were observed throughout the conduct of the study. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection commenced. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

To protect privacy and confidentiality, personally identifiable information was excluded from the research report, and participant pseudonyms were used during analysis and presentation of findings. Audio recordings, transcripts, and related research materials were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

The researchers likewise adhered to the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice throughout the conduct of the investigation, ensuring that participants were treated with dignity and that no foreseeable harm resulted from their involvement in the study.

RESULTS

The analysis of interview transcripts revealed four major themes describing the lived experiences of female seafarers regarding gender equality in the maritime industry: (1) Gendered Perceptions and Workplace Discrimination, (2) Psychological and Cultural

Barriers to Participation, (3) Resilience and Personal Transformation in a Male-Dominated Environment, and (4) Gaps in Institutional Support and Inclusive Workplace Practices. These themes collectively illustrate how female seafarers navigate professional environments characterized by persistent gender biases while simultaneously developing strategies for adaptation, growth, and advancement.

Theme 1: Gendered Perceptions and Workplace Discrimination. Participants described experiencing prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviors that stemmed from perceptions that women are less capable than men in maritime professions. These experiences manifested through condescending treatment, questioning of competence, and exclusionary attitudes from male colleagues and superiors.

One participant (P3) recalled an interaction with a superior officer:

"That chief engineer looked at me at this kind of, how to say, he gave this kind of expression where, like, you know, like, you are stupid, yeah."

This response illustrates how women may experience subtle forms of workplace devaluation that undermine professional credibility. Participants expressed that such encounters often created additional pressure to demonstrate competence and gain acceptance within the shipboard environment.

Several respondents also reported direct experiences of gender-based discrimination from leadership personnel. One participant (P5) shared:

"Yes, I encountered it when I was a second engineer. I had a chief engineer who said he does not want to sail with a female. He doesn't trust females and that females should not be on board."

This account reflects explicit exclusionary attitudes that position women as unsuitable for maritime work. Participants indicated that such beliefs often affect workplace relationships,

professional opportunities, and perceptions of their abilities.

Another participant (P1) highlighted how assumptions regarding physical capability continue to influence attitudes toward female seafarers:

"Of course, we know that the capacity of a man is different from that of a woman. Although we can do their work, there are things that we can't do."

The findings suggest that gendered perceptions of ability remain deeply embedded within maritime workplaces, shaping how women are viewed and treated in their professional roles.

Theme 2: Psychological and Cultural Barriers to Participation. Beyond direct discrimination, participants identified several psychological and cultural barriers that affected women's participation and advancement in maritime careers. These barriers included limited representation in leadership positions, difficulties gaining respect, and internalized doubts resulting from prevailing gender norms.

One participant (P7) emphasized the lack of visible female role models:

"I feel that it's mostly the lack of visible role models. Like, there's not a lot of females or any woman in leadership positions currently."

Participants noted that the absence of women in senior positions limited opportunities for mentorship and reduced the visibility of potential career pathways for aspiring female seafarers.

Another participant (P6) described how respect is often influenced by gender-based assumptions:

"Respect is there. But people will choose who they will give respect to. The mentality of seafarers today is that women can't do it."

This statement reflects the continued existence of cultural perceptions that challenge women's professional legitimacy in maritime settings.

Participants also discussed the psychological effects of these social expectations. One of them (P2) explained:

"So, first, maybe they limit themselves because they think they can't do it. But when you're already there, it's a power of mindset."

This perspective highlights how societal and workplace expectations may contribute to self-doubt among women, while also illustrating the importance of personal confidence in overcoming such barriers.

Theme 3: Resilience and Personal Transformation in a Male-Dominated Environment. Despite encountering discrimination and cultural barriers, participants consistently described developing resilience, determination, and self-confidence through their experiences at sea. Challenges were frequently portrayed not only as obstacles but also as opportunities for personal and professional growth. One participant (P4) explained:

"Of course, it boosts our determination to prove ourselves. It affects us, not negatively. It becomes a stepping stone for me to do and to think more."

Similarly, another participant (P8) stated:

"I feel they drive me to work even harder and develop more to be more resilient. Like it makes me want to prove to myself even more."

These narratives suggest that adversity often became a source of motivation, encouraging women to strengthen their capabilities and persist within their chosen profession.

Participants also described significant personal development resulting from their occupational experiences. One participant (P3) reflected:

"The challenges that I encounter on board make me stronger. Because when I was a student, I used to cry. But when you get on board, you learn to be independent, control your emotions, and make decisions."

The findings reveal that female seafarers frequently undergo processes of personal transformation characterized by increased independence, emotional maturity, adaptability, and professional confidence.

Theme 4: Gaps in Institutional Support and Inclusive Workplace Practices. Participants identified important shortcomings in organizational policies, workplace resources, and support mechanisms designed to address the needs of female seafarers. These gaps were evident in both practical workplace provisions and broader organizational efforts to promote inclusion.

One participant (P1) highlighted a seemingly basic but important concern:

"When it comes to uniforms, like, for example, in my company, they offer uniforms. Okay? But the sizes of the uniforms, none are for women."

This response suggests that organizational systems often continue to be designed primarily around male employees, resulting in the neglect of needs specific to female personnel.

Participants also emphasized the importance of creating workplace cultures characterized by safety and inclusion. One (P7) of the participants stated:

"They should create an environment where everyone can work freely without discrimination and harassment."

Another participant (P2) recommended the establishment of dedicated reporting mechanisms for women:

"Maybe have a hotline for females in case anything happens. So, they will feel safe to express and not feel very scared to reach out."

These accounts indicate that female seafarers view organizational support, protection mechanisms, and inclusive workplace practices as essential components of promoting gender equality within the maritime sector.

Summary of Findings. The findings reveal that female seafarers continue to encounter workplace discrimination, gender-based stereotypes, and cultural barriers that affect their professional experiences. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated considerable resilience and personal growth, often transforming adversity into motivation for professional development. At the same time, the narratives underscore persistent gaps in institutional support and inclusive workplace practices, highlighting the need for environments that better recognize, accommodate, and protect women working in the maritime industry.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the lived experiences of female seafarers regarding barriers and challenges to gender equality within the maritime industry. The findings revealed four interconnected themes: (1) Gendered Perceptions and Workplace Discrimination, (2) Psychological and Cultural Barriers to Participation, (3) Resilience and Personal Transformation in a Male-Dominated Environment, and (4) Gaps in Institutional Support and Inclusive Workplace Practices. Collectively, these themes illustrate the continuing influence of gendered organizational cultures within maritime workplaces while simultaneously highlighting women's capacity to adapt, persevere, and succeed despite persistent barriers.

Gendered Perceptions and Workplace Discrimination. The findings demonstrate that gender-based discrimination remains a significant reality for many female seafarers. Participants reported experiences ranging from subtle forms of workplace devaluation to explicit statements questioning women's suitability for maritime work. Such experiences

suggest that traditional assumptions regarding gender roles continue to influence perceptions of competence, authority, and professional legitimacy onboard vessels.

These findings are consistent with previous studies indicating that women in maritime industries frequently encounter stereotypes that portray seafaring as a masculine occupation (Dragomir, 2018; Kitada et al., 2020). Research has shown that women are often required to exert greater effort to gain professional recognition and establish credibility in environments historically dominated by men (Popa et al., 2025). Participants' narratives reflect this phenomenon, as many described feeling compelled to continually prove their abilities in order to obtain the same level of trust and respect often afforded automatically to male colleagues.

The findings further suggest that discrimination is not limited to isolated interpersonal interactions but may also be embedded within workplace cultures and organizational assumptions. This observation reinforces arguments that gender inequality in maritime professions is sustained not only through formal structures but also through everyday practices, attitudes, and social expectations that shape workplace experiences (Büber & Demirkol, 2026).

Psychological and Cultural Barriers to Participation. Beyond direct discrimination, participants described psychological and cultural barriers that affect women's participation and advancement in maritime careers. The absence of female role models, perceived difficulties in gaining respect, and prevailing assumptions regarding women's capabilities emerged as significant challenges.

These findings align with the work of Ozdemir and Albayrak (2019), who argued that occupational judgments often reflect broader societal beliefs regarding gender and work. Similarly, Kitada et al. (2019) observed that maritime professions remain strongly

associated with masculine occupational identities, reinforcing perceptions that leadership and technical expertise are primarily male attributes. Such cultural expectations may influence how women view themselves, how others evaluate their performance, and how opportunities are distributed within organizations.

An important insight emerging from the present study is that gender inequality extends beyond structural barriers to include internal psychological consequences. Participants acknowledged that women may sometimes develop self-doubt as a result of repeated exposure to stereotypes and exclusionary attitudes. However, they also emphasized that confidence and mindset play critical roles in overcoming these challenges. This finding suggests that the impact of gender inequality is both external and internal, affecting not only workplace opportunities but also the ways women perceive their own professional potential.

Resilience and Personal Transformation in a Male-Dominated Environment. Despite the difficulties encountered, participants consistently described experiences of personal growth, resilience, and professional development. Rather than allowing discrimination and adversity to discourage them, many women viewed these challenges as opportunities to strengthen their determination and demonstrate their capabilities.

This finding supports previous research indicating that female seafarers often develop adaptive coping mechanisms to navigate male-dominated work environments (Ryals, 2023). Women who remain in maritime professions frequently exhibit high levels of perseverance, self-efficacy, and commitment despite encountering structural and interpersonal barriers. The narratives presented in this study reveal that resilience functions as both a personal resource and a professional strategy, enabling women to maintain motivation and career engagement.

The findings also highlight the transformative nature of maritime work experiences. Participants described becoming more independent, emotionally resilient, and confident as a result of the challenges they encountered. From a phenomenological perspective, these experiences demonstrate how adversity contributes to identity formation and personal meaning-making. Rather than simply enduring workplace barriers, participants actively interpreted and transformed these experiences into sources of growth and empowerment.

Gaps in Institutional Support and Inclusive Workplace Practices. The study further revealed that participants perceive significant shortcomings in organizational support systems and workplace inclusivity. Concerns regarding gender-responsive facilities, reporting mechanisms, and broader organizational commitment to equality indicate that many maritime institutions have yet to fully accommodate the needs of female personnel.

These findings correspond with reports from the Global Maritime Forum (2024), which identified inadequate workplace support structures and limited institutional responsiveness as persistent barriers to women's participation in maritime careers. Similarly, Silverio (2024) noted that many maritime organizations continue to operate according to systems and procedures historically designed around predominantly male workforces.

The participants' recommendations for dedicated reporting mechanisms, anti-harassment protections, and more inclusive workplace environments emphasize the importance of organizational accountability in advancing gender equality. The findings suggest that while individual resilience is important, meaningful progress also requires institutional commitment. Organizations must move beyond symbolic inclusion efforts and develop practical measures that ensure women can work safely, confidently, and equitably within maritime settings.

Implications of the Study. The findings have several important implications for maritime education, industry practice, and policy development. First, maritime organizations should strengthen diversity and inclusion initiatives by addressing both overt and subtle forms of gender discrimination. Second, mentorship and leadership-development programs for women should be expanded to increase visibility and representation within senior maritime positions. Third, organizations should establish gender-responsive policies, reporting systems, and workplace resources that support women's well-being and professional advancement.

From a broader perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to improve gender equality in maritime professions must simultaneously address structural barriers, organizational culture, and individual empowerment. Sustainable change requires an integrated approach involving maritime institutions, educational organizations, regulators, and industry stakeholders.

Contribution to Knowledge. This study contributes to the growing body of maritime gender research by providing a phenomenological understanding of how female seafarers experience and interpret gender inequality within their professional environment. While previous studies have largely focused on workforce participation, policy implementation, and organizational trends, this research highlights the subjective realities underlying these broader patterns.

By foregrounding women's lived experiences, the study offers insights into the interpersonal, psychological, and institutional dimensions of gender inequality that may not be fully captured through quantitative indicators. The findings therefore enrich current understandings of workplace inclusion and contribute to ongoing discussions regarding gender equity in maritime professions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions. Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study focused on a relatively small number of participants, which is consistent with phenomenological inquiry but may limit the transferability of findings to all female seafarers. Second, the study relied on self-reported experiences, which reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations of events. Third, the findings represent experiences within specific maritime contexts and may not fully reflect the diversity of experiences across different vessel types, ranks, or national settings.

Future studies may expand the participant pool to include female maritime officers, ratings, and shore-based maritime professionals from diverse geographic regions. Comparative studies involving male and female seafarers may also provide deeper insights into how gender dynamics operate within maritime organizations. Additionally, mixed-methods research may help examine the relationship between lived experiences of gender inequality and broader organizational outcomes such as retention, career advancement, and workplace satisfaction.

Conclusion. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of female seafarers regarding barriers and challenges to gender equality within the maritime industry. The findings revealed that women continue to encounter gendered perceptions, workplace discrimination, psychological and cultural barriers, and insufficient institutional support despite ongoing efforts to promote gender inclusion throughout the sector. These challenges demonstrate that traditional gender stereotypes and organizational practices remain influential factors shaping the professional experiences of female maritime personnel.

Despite these barriers, the participants exhibited remarkable resilience, adaptability, and determination. Many transformed adverse experiences into opportunities for personal growth, professional development, and increased self-confidence. Their narratives illustrate both the challenges associated with

working in a male-dominated industry and the capacity of women to thrive within demanding maritime environments.

The study contributes to maritime gender literature by providing a phenomenological understanding of how female seafarers experience and interpret gender inequality within shipboard settings. By foregrounding participants' lived experiences, the research offers nuanced insights into the interpersonal, cultural, and organizational dimensions of workplace inequality that may not be fully captured through quantitative approaches.

The findings further suggest the need for maritime organizations, educational institutions, and regulatory bodies to strengthen diversity initiatives, establish gender-responsive workplace policies, provide accessible reporting mechanisms, and promote female representation in leadership positions. Such measures are essential for creating safer, more inclusive, and equitable maritime workplaces.

Future studies may examine the experiences of female seafarers across different vessel types, national contexts, and occupational ranks, while comparative and mixed-methods investigations may provide a broader understanding of gender dynamics within the maritime industry.

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