

PROFILING A LADY CHIEF ENGINEER

Life at sea is always considered tough and challenging. When it comes to a lady, many of us consider the profession unsuitable for her. Ms. Suneti Bala is one of the few Indian marine engineers to have reached the rank of Chief Engineer of a merchant vessel. She shares with us her experience in merchant navy in her own words

I belong to a middle class family from UP. My father is an ex-air force officer and my mother is a lawyer. My father's profession fascinated me when I was young, but as I grew up, the fascination shifted to a career 'at sea'. The adventurous nature of sea appealed to me. Without knowing much about this profession, I joined Marine Engineering and Research Institute (MERI) Kolkata in 1998.



Later I came to know that I was the second girl cadet to take admission in this college since its inception.

Initial period in the college was little difficult. Females had been a rare breed in the campus. Other cadets took time to accept me as their classmate. Barring few, I was accepted well by most of them in no time. Unfortunately, I still have some people around, with a belief (especially from Asian region) that this profession is not meant for a girl and that they are better suited for domestic jobs. Earlier I used to

react, but in due course of time I have learnt how to deal with such remarks. A smile and a deaf ear came up as the perfect answer. I personally don't think selection of a career should be a function of gender; instead it should depend on personal interest and capabilities.

My sea going career started as a junior engineer with Chevron shipping in 2002. Presently I am sailing as a Chief Engineer with The SCI Ltd. Journey from Chevron to SCI was full of learning experiences, most of them were wonderful! At times it was bitter too. Being a lady, I had to prove my capability at every occasion. Whenever I joined a ship, my seniors and shipmates used to be concerned about my capabilities to perform task, irrespective of my decent experience in the same rank on previous vessels. It used to take a couple of weeks before they would accept me as their colleague, rather than a "female" moving around in the engine room.

One question very frequently asked to me, mostly from people outside shipping industry is 'Do you feel safe on ship, isn't it risky?' This 'risk' is not about fire, collision, sinking, piracy etc. They consider my shipmates as a threat. I have always found the seafarers educated, cultured and very supportive. This may be because of the qualification and training requirements which ensure entry of educated and cultured persons to the ships. For these



reasons, I believe a female is much safer onboard than ashore. I personally never had any bitter experience in my entire sea going career on this front. Probably the other female mariners were not so fortunate. As a result, they feel 'females should not be friendly with their male colleagues or it will be misunderstood with something else and it will lead to gossip behind the

back'. I would like to advise all my juniors, especially the females joining this profession, to concentrate on job assigned, understand ship's culture closely and to interact with everybody on ship not only to few selected ones. Share your problems with your shipmates and slowly a change will be witnessed in ships atmosphere. If you do your job properly, recognition will definitely follow.

I wish to thank all my seniors, the officers and staff members of MERI for their guidance and for having faith in me. I also thank my critics as their criticism instigated me to work harder in order to prove them wrong.

Lastly I thank IME(I) and MER(I) editorial board for giving me an opportunity to share my experience with my community of fellow marine engineers. ■

