Filipina Seafarers' Success Stories in Sailing the Seven Seas: A Case Study

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Abstract

Aim: This study explored the lived experiences and success stories of Filipina seafarers to understand how they overcame socio-cultural and gender-based barriers in the male-dominated maritime industry.

Methodology: A qualitative case study design was employed, involving five purposively selected Filipina seafarers with officer-level positions and at least five years of sea service. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, photo documentation, field notes, and archival materials. Thematic analysis identified common patterns and insights from the narratives.

Results: Five major themes emerged: financial motivations; gender discrimination; mentorship and family support; resilience and professional competence; and fulfillment through global exposure and leadership roles. Despite systemic challenges, participants demonstrated adaptability, confidence, and commitment to their careers.

Conclusion: Filipina seafarers achieve professional success through personal resilience and institutional support. Gender-inclusive policies, mentorship programs, and post-graduation networks are recommended to empower future female seafarers and promote gender equity in the maritime industry.

Keywords: *Filipina seafarers, gender challenges, maritime industry, resilience, success stories, inclusivity*

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is widely recognized as one of the leading suppliers of maritime professionals globally, yet women remain significantly underrepresented in the seafaring workforce. As of 2021, women account for only 1.28% of the global seafaring population (IMO, 2021), with Filipina officers representing an even smaller fraction. Despite efforts to promote gender equality, the maritime industry remains largely male-dominated, posing unique challenges for Filipina seafarers pursuing careers at sea.

While earlier studies (e.g., Kitada et al., 2015) examined gender discrimination and organizational barriers faced by women in maritime fields, limited research in the past decade has documented the lived success stories of Filipina seafarers who have navigated these barriers. More recent reports (DOLE, 2022; IMO, 2021; POEA, 2020) highlight both persistent underrepresentation and gradual industry shifts, underscoring the need for updated analysis. Filipina seafarers often confront systemic hurdles ranging from cultural bias and restricted career advancement to harassment and lack of mentorship. These challenges are further intensified by cultural expectations of women as primary caregivers, discouraging many from continuing maritime careers. However, a growing number of Filipinas are attaining officer-level positions, signalling both individual resilience and incremental institutional progress toward inclusivity.

Grounded in feminist epistemology and subjectivism, this study positions the lived experiences of Filipina officers as critical sites of knowledge production. Feminist theory emphasizes the value of women's narratives in challenging dominant structures that marginalize their contributions. Within this framework, the research explores how Filipina officers define and experience success in their profession, how they navigate gendered spaces on-board, and what support systems or barriers they encounter.

The academic contribution of this study lies in extending beyond prior literature (e.g., Kitada et al., 2015) by focusing on success narratives rather than barriers alone. These accounts illuminate the intersection of gender, leadership, and resilience in maritime work, while also highlighting how women's contributions reshape an industry

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long considered male-dominated. Furthermore, by explicitly connecting global underrepresentation statistics with the Philippine maritime workforce, the study demonstrates both the local relevance and global significance of Filipina officers' stories.

Finally, this study anticipates tangible outcomes: informing curriculum development in maritime education and training (MET), enhancing mentorship and student support services, and guiding policy reforms to promote gender equity in maritime education and workforce development. In doing so, it responds directly to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: gender equality and SDG 8: decent work and economic growth) and supports ongoing calls for gender-responsive policies in global and Philippine maritime contexts.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Global Perspectives

The maritime industry has long been male-dominated, with women encountering systemic barriers to both entry and advancement. According to the IMO–WISTA 2024 survey, there were 176,820 women employed across the global maritime sector, up from 151,979 in 2021. Despite this increase, women still constitute only ~19% of the overall workforce, and at sea they represent a mere ~1% of seafarers (IMO–WISTA, 2024). These statistics underscore the persistent gender imbalance, particularly in shipboard roles, despite gradual progress in shore-based and administrative positions.

Global scholarship reinforces these trends. Kitada, Williams, and Froholdt (2015) emphasized cultural stereotypes and male-dominated work environments as barriers to gender equality in seafaring. More recently, a 2023 study on women seafarers in Tanzania reported recurring challenges such as workplace isolation, lack of maternity protection, unequal pay, and work–life imbalance, suggesting that systemic gender issues are not unique to the Philippines but are shared across Global South maritime industries (DMI Journal, 2023).

Philippine Context

In the Philippines—recognized as the top supplier of seafarers worldwide—research has consistently documented women's underrepresentation and struggles to advance in sea-based roles. Recent findings validate these patterns. The 2023 study, "Maximizing the Potentials of Filipino Female Maritime Seafarers," highlighted continued resistance to women's deployment at sea, with female graduates often relegated to shore-based or auxiliary positions despite equivalent qualifications (International Journal of Social Science Research and Review, 2023). Likewise, a 2022 workforce report from the Philippine Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) identified persistent barriers to female employment in officer-level positions, further emphasizing the gap between educational attainment and labor market absorption.

Related Maritime Professions

Gendered challenges extend beyond seafaring into related maritime fields. A 2025 phenomenological study, "Anchored in Duty: Lived Experiences of Women in Maritime Policing," revealed similar struggles with gender bias, resilience, and adaptation, as well as the critical role of mentorship and institutional support (RSIS International, 2025). These findings indicate that systemic inequalities transcend occupational boundaries, further affirming the need for cross-sector gender-inclusive frameworks.

Theoretical Lens

Overall, the literature shows that although women's participation in maritime professions has gradually increased, they remain significantly underrepresented at sea, where barriers to entry and career progression remain deeply entrenched. By integrating updated global statistics (IMO–WISTA, 2024), comparative studies from Tanzania (2023), localized Philippine workforce reports (DOLE, 2022; IJSSRR, 2023), and related research in maritime policing (RSIS International, 2025), this study strengthens its theoretical foundation and situates the narratives of Filipina seafarers within both global and localized contexts.

This review is grounded in feminist epistemology and subjectivist perspectives, which recognize women's lived experiences as valuable sources of knowledge often excluded from mainstream discourse. Feminist theory critiques structural inequalities that marginalize women while amplifying their voices in professional and academic spaces (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Through this lens, the study not only highlights barriers but also underscores narratives of resilience, competence, and leadership that redefine women's roles in the maritime sector.

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Conceptual Framework

In the context of the maritime industry, feminist theory highlights how power relations, gendered hierarchies, and cultural expectations shape women's opportunities and challenges. The underrepresentation of Filipina seafarers is not merely a statistical concern but reflects structural inequalities embedded in maritime education, recruitment, and workplace practices. By foregrounding women's narratives, this study positions their experiences as legitimate knowledge that can inform institutional reforms and gender-inclusive policies.
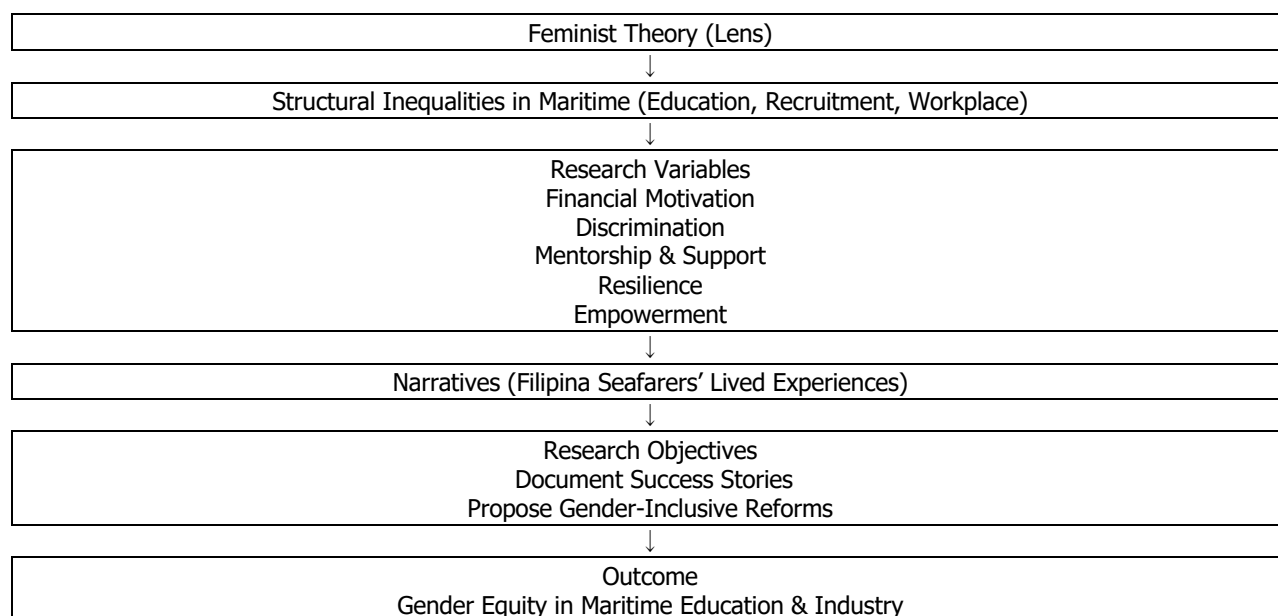
Aligned with this framework, the study adopts a subjectivist epistemology, recognizing that truth and meaning are co-constructed through individual experiences and social interactions (Crotty, 1998). Rather than treating participants as data points, the study values their subjective accounts of motivation, discrimination, coping, and professional success as valid contributions to maritime discourse.

The integration of feminist theory with the study objectives ensures alignment in the following ways:

1. Research Variables – Concepts such as financial motivation, discrimination, mentorship, resilience, and empowerment are analyzed through a feminist lens that questions structural barriers and emphasizes women's agency.
2. Narratives – The lived experiences of participants serve as critical texts, where coping strategies and success stories are interpreted as acts of resistance against gendered constraints.
3. Objectives – The study's goal to document success stories and suggest gender-inclusive reforms directly reflects feminist commitments to equity, inclusivity, and transformation of male-dominated structures.

By explicitly situating the study within a feminist theoretical framework, the research underscores that success stories of Filipina seafarers are not isolated personal achievements but part of a broader struggle for recognition, representation, and gender equality in the maritime industry.

Conceptual Diagram

Feminist Theory (Lens)

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Structural Inequalities in Maritime (Education, Recruitment, Workplace)

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Research Variables Financial Motivation Discrimination Mentorship & Support Resilience Empowerment

↓

Narratives (Filipina Seafarers' Lived Experiences)

↓

Research Objectives Document Success Stories Propose Gender-Inclusive Reforms

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Outcome Gender Equity in Maritime Education & Industry

Statement of the Problem

Despite the growing participation of women in the global maritime industry, Filipina seafarers continue to face unique challenges in navigating career advancement, gender biases, and recognition in a traditionally male-dominated sector. While previous studies have highlighted gender disparities in maritime professions, there is limited documentation of the individual success stories of Filipina seafarers who have excelled in various roles at sea. This lack of systematic exploration creates a gap in understanding how these women achieve professional success, overcome industry barriers, and contribute to the maritime sector. The study, therefore, seeks to explore and

609

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document the success stories of Filipina seafarers, highlighting the strategies, experiences, and factors that have enabled their achievements. By doing so, the research aims to provide insights that can inform policies, programs, and initiatives to empower women in a gender-inclusive maritime industry.

Research Objectives

General Objective:
- To explore and document the success stories of Filipina seafarers in the maritime industry.

Specific Objectives:
1. To identify the personal, educational, and professional experiences that have contributed to the success of Filipina seafarers.
2. To examine the strategies and approaches Filipina seafarers employ to overcome challenges and barriers in the maritime industry.
3. To determine how the documented success stories can provide actionable insights for promoting gender inclusivity and empowerment in maritime careers.

Research Questions
1. What personal, educational, and professional experiences have contributed to the success of Filipina seafarers?
2. What strategies and approaches do Filipina seafarers employ to overcome challenges in the maritime industry?
3. How can the success stories of Filipina seafarers provide insights for empowering women in a gender-inclusive maritime sector?

METHODS

Research Design
This study utilized a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences and success stories of Filipina seafarers who have achieved officer-level ranks in the maritime profession. A case study approach was selected to gain a deeper understanding of how these women navigated gender-based challenges and succeeded in a male-dominated industry, ensuring clarity and academic rigor.

A case study approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth, context-rich exploration of participants' narratives, which would not be fully captured through quantitative or mixed methods that emphasize breadth over depth. By focusing on qualitative inquiry, the study prioritized the subjective meanings, coping strategies, and resilience practices of Filipina seafarers within the male-dominated maritime industry.

The research was anchored in a feminist perspective and subjectivist epistemology, which value women's voices as legitimate sources of knowledge and highlight how gendered power relations shape their professional trajectories. This orientation is consistent with the study's aim to foreground women's narratives as both personal achievements and contributions to broader gender equity in maritime work.

Data were collected between March and June 2025, ensuring sufficient time to gather, transcribe, and analyze the narratives while maintaining methodological rigor.

Participants and Sampling
Five Filipina seafarers were purposively selected as participants. Each of them met specific inclusion criteria: (1) must be a Filipina licensed officer with a minimum of five years of sea experience, and (2) willing to share personal stories and maritime experiences. This criterion ensured clarity and alignment with the study's objective of documenting women's success stories in the male-dominated maritime field.

The participants represented a range of ages (27–42 years old), vessel types (bulk carriers, container ships, and passenger vessels), and years in service (5–18 years). This diversity provided richer perspectives on the lived experiences of Filipina seafarers across different contexts of maritime employment.

The sample size of five was justified based on qualitative research standards, where depth of inquiry is prioritized over breadth. In narrative and case study research, small but information-rich samples allow for in-depth exploration of personal experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Saturation was reached after the fifth participant, as

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recurring themes were consistently observed across interviews. Only those who held officer-level ranks were considered, ensuring that the focus remained on successful career progression in seafaring.

Instruments

The researchers used multiple data collection tools to enhance triangulation and depth. These included semi-structured interview guides, photo documentation, archived documents, and an aide-memoire. The use of multiple instruments ensured clarity, academic rigor, and comprehensive capture of participants' lived experiences.

The semi-structured interview guide was explicitly aligned with the study's research objectives, with questions designed to elicit participants' experiences regarding financial motivation, gender-based challenges, coping mechanisms, mentorship, and professional growth. This alignment ensured that the data collected directly addressed the study's goals (Sanchez, 2025).

Validation of the instruments involved feedback rounds with maritime education experts and qualitative research specialists. A pilot test was conducted with one non-participating Filipina seafarer to refine question clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. This process strengthened the instruments' content validity and ethical soundness (Amihan et al., 2023).

The aide-memoire supported systematic tracking of recurring themes and participant-specific highlights, while photo documentation and archival materials supplemented narratives with visual and contextual evidence, ensuring depth and authenticity in capturing participants' experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through one-on-one in-depth interviews and supported by photo elicitation and archival document reviews. Interviews were conducted virtually via secure online platforms depending on availability. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, allowing sufficient time for participants to share detailed narratives, reflections, and experiences. The interviews were recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes and participant-provided photos that reflected key milestones in their careers. The photo elicitation technique helped evoke memories and emotions, deepening the narrative engagement during interviews.

All interviews were recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with field notes and participant-provided photos that reflected key milestones in their maritime careers. The photo elicitation technique helped evoke memories and emotions, deepening narrative engagement and providing visual context to the participants' stories.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The researcher familiarized with the data, generated initial codes, searched for patterns, reviewed themes, defined and named them, and produced the final report. This process ensured clarity, coherence, and methodological rigor in capturing participants' lived experiences.

Key statements from the interviews were highlighted, coded, and categorized into major themes directly linked to the study's research objectives, such as financial motivation, gender-based challenges, mentorship, resilience, and professional fulfillment. This alignment facilitated a focused interpretation of participants' narratives in relation to the research questions (Bontuyan, 2025).

Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, where participants reviewed summaries of their interviews to confirm accuracy and authenticity, and peer debriefing with qualitative research experts, who examined coding and theme development for consistency and credibility.

Theoretical framing included Weiner's Attribution Theory and McClelland's Human Motivation Theory, guiding the interpretation of participants' motivations, coping strategies, and career progression. This integration of theory, coding, and thematic alignment strengthened the validity and depth of the study's findings.

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Credibility

To enhance the credibility and rigor of the study, multiple strategies were employed:

- **Triangulation:** Data were sourced from interviews, photographs, archival materials, and field notes.
- **Member checking:** Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and preliminary findings to ensure accuracy and authenticity of representation.

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- **Audit trail:** Detailed documentation of coding, thematic development, and reflexive notes were maintained to provide transparency in the analytic process.
- **Researcher reflexivity:** The researcher consistently reflected on personal biases and positionality to minimize undue influence on data interpretation (Bontuyan, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to interviews, and they were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any point. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms in all transcripts and published outputs. Ethical approval was granted by the research adviser and institution. The study also followed the provisions of the Data Privacy Act of 2012, ensuring secure handling and eventual disposal of all personal and sensitive data.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This section presents the results through themes derived from the narratives of the five informants. Each theme includes relevant excerpts, analysis, and discussion, supported by related literature. The organization of themes follows the study's research questions.

1. **Becoming Part of the Maritime Industry**

Themes
Financial Motivation and
Family Influence

Economic necessity and family inspiration were central to participants' decision to enter the maritime field. Scholarships provided access to education, while role models, particularly fathers already in the profession, shaped career aspirations.

Informant 1: "Initially, since we could not afford my dream school and course… I thought, okay, let's go to this Academy which offers everything for free so that I could have a degree."

Informant 3: "It was influenced by my father being a seafarer."

These accounts resonate with Delos Reyes et al. (2023), who found that financial limitations and parental occupations strongly influence career choices in maritime education. Unlike Delos Reyes, however, this study highlights how financial and familial factors overlap, positioning seafaring not only as a practical choice but also as a deeply personal continuation of family legacy.

Summary: Financial stability and family inspiration were powerful entry points into seafaring, aligning with the study's objective of understanding pathways into the profession.

2. **Memorable Experiences as Motivation**

Themes
Travel, Achievement
and Overcoming Challenges

Beyond financial rewards, participants drew lasting motivation from positive experiences at sea. Travel, professional achievement, and proving themselves against doubt were central to their commitment.

Informant 1: "Good memories are from shore leaves… going to different countries and experiencing different Cultures."

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Informant 4: "My motivation was when I was told… that I will never become more than a fourth engineer. I proved them wrong."

Kilag et al. (2023) and Novelti et al. (2023) emphasized that travel and personal achievements enhance job satisfaction among women seafarers. This study builds on that finding by showing how *overcoming discouragement* became just as significant as external rewards. Where previous research highlighted material and experiential incentives, the present study underscores resilience against discouragement as a critical motivational force.

Summary: Travel, recognition, and resilience against doubt strengthened long-term commitment to the maritime profession, contributing to women's persistence in the field.

3. **Challenges Faced Onboard**

Themes
Gender-based Discrimination
and Workload Pressures

Challenges on-board were consistently linked to gender-based discrimination, stereotyping, and emotional strain. Participants shared experiences of being underestimated because of their gender and coping with demanding workloads while separated from family.

Informant 2: "I tend to be underestimated often by people who don't know me yet. I am seen first as a woman."

Informant 5: "Being away from family and working in a male-dominated place.

Leano et al. (2019) noted similar challenges, but this study adds nuance by showing how these difficulties were not only obstacles but also turning points for personal growth. Unlike Leano's focus on discrimination as a barrier, the findings here emphasize how participants reframed hardship into opportunities to develop confidence and competence.

Summary: Gender bias and workload strain remain significant challenges; however, women's ability to transform these struggles into growth opportunities highlights resilience as a defining feature of their success stories.

4. **Coping Mechanisms**

Themes
Building Resilience, Professionalism
And Boundaries

Faced with adversity, participants adopted varied coping strategies. They became assertive in setting boundaries, emphasized professionalism, and relied on resilience to navigate difficult situations.

Informant 1: "I became vocal whenever I felt uncomfortable about malicious talks or advances."

Informant 3: "I show competence and sincerity to earn respect."

Zywica et al. (2021) confirmed that resilience, professionalism, and emotional intelligence are critical traits in high-pressure industries. While previous research highlighted coping as an individual capacity, this study underscores the role of boundary-setting as a collective assertion of dignity in the workplace.

Summary: Women drew strength from resilience, professionalism, and firm boundaries, showing that coping was not only personal but also relational, demanding recognition and respect.

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5. **Staying in the Maritime Industry**

Themes
Financial Stability
Personal Fulfilment
Evolving Industry Support

Despite hardships, participants remained committed to their careers. They cited financial stability, personal fulfilment, and gradual improvements in industry support as reasons for staying.

Informant 4: "The salary and the experience of traveling the world for free."

Informant 5: "The industry is slowly changing, and there are rules that protect women."

Cabañero (2023) highlighted financial stability as a retention factor but also pointed to slow institutional change. This study reinforces those findings while emphasizing that retention is driven not only by economics but also by passion for exploration and the perception of incremental progress in gender inclusivity.

Summary: Women remain in seafaring for financial, personal, and evolving institutional reasons, showing that retention is both economically and emotionally grounded.

6. **Learning Experiences**

Themes
Competence and Teamwork
Boundaries for Respect
Strength from Faith

Beyond skills, participants gained personal values and spiritual strength. Competence and teamwork, along with reliance on faith, were highlighted as sustaining factors.

Informant 1: "It is important to be competent in your job and have a good working relationship with the crew."

Informant 5: "Constant prayer makes things bearable."

Martinez and Lee (2023) and Sorin et al. (2019) also identified spirituality and emotional regulation as key coping mechanisms for women in maritime. The present study deepens this by linking competence with faith, suggesting that technical ability and inner strength form a dual foundation for survival and growth.

Summary: Learning extended beyond technical mastery to values of teamwork, boundaries, and faith, underscoring holistic growth in women's maritime journeys.

7. **Words of Encouragement**

Themes
Perseverance, Passion
And Personal Growth

Finally, participants shared empowering messages for future generations of seafarers. They encouraged self-belief, passion, and the pursuit of growth through challenges.

Informant 3: "Always believe in yourself and prove that you are capable."

Informant 4: "Sail the world, push yourself beyond your comfort zone, and learn more about yourself."

James (2020) and Scott et al. (2019) emphasized mentorship and self-efficacy as vital for success in demanding careers. This study complements that perspective by highlighting women's first-hand voices as a source of inspiration for others, suggesting that role modelling itself is a form of empowerment.

Summary: Words of encouragement reinforced perseverance, passion, and self-belief as guiding values, directly contributing to the study's aim of documenting women's success narratives.

Researcher's Reflections on the Study

Reflections on the study indicate that financial necessity, family influence, and memorable experiences such as travel and personal growth were key motivators for participants to remain in the maritime profession. Gender discrimination and physically demanding work required participants to assert themselves and employ coping strategies, including setting boundaries, drawing strength from faith, and maintaining professionalism. The findings highlight the importance of stronger institutional support and inclusive policies. Overall, the study underscores the value of amplifying voices often overlooked in male-dominated maritime narratives.

Recommendations

To create a more inclusive maritime industry, female seafarers should be empowered through awareness of their rights, strengthened resilience, and access to mentorship and professional networks.

Maritime schools are encouraged to incorporate self-defence and emotional preparedness training into their programs and to invite experienced female seafarers as guest speakers, linking directly to findings on the importance of mentorship and role models. Strengthening alumni networks can provide additional career guidance and support, addressing participants' need for ongoing professional development.

Shipping companies and policymakers should strictly enforce anti-harassment policies to address the reported gender discrimination on-board. They should also promote gender equity in recruitment and promotion and foster a culture of respect and inclusion. Providing equal opportunities for leadership and professional development will enhance both women's careers and overall workforce diversity and performance.

Finally, future researchers are encouraged to examine the long-term effects of inclusivity efforts and to continue documenting success stories of Filipina seafarers, supporting evidence-based policy reforms and inspiring future generations.

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