

The Case for Gender Equality

by Lydia Mullan

As companies and organizations look toward holistic approaches to improve workplace morale, addressing gender bias needs to be near the top of the list

“There are usually a lot more girls in bikinis here to send us off,” one of the bowmen pouts as we do a lap of Rhode Island’s Narragansett Bay on the way out to the 12 Metre World Championships. I brace myself against a sidestay, trying to line up a good photo of America’s Cup veteran Dick Enersen at the helm. He’s too far away to hear any of this, so his crew continues.

“You could make up for it by taking your clothes off.”

“I am at work,” I remind him tersely, gesturing to the logo of the magazine I write for embroidered on my cap.

“Uh oh, someone’s gonna get me-too’d,” another teases.

“Oh man, can you guys believe all that me-too bullshit?” someone asks. What he’s really asking is, “None of you guys are going to back this girl up if I make her uncomfortable, right?”

It’s only 11 a.m., and it’s already been a long day of comments: “What career didn’t pan out for a girl like you to end up in sailing?” or “I want to introduce you to my son. You look like the kind of girl I want having my grandbabies.” I’ve had more than my share of practice, but I’m never satisfied with how I respond to that sort of thing. I’m reluctant to risk a righteous indignation explosion torching the rapport I’ve built with an interview subject. There’s no good answer. I check my watch. I have five more hours until we’ll be back on shore.

It’s not just professional sailing that struggles with sexism; the marine industry as a whole is behind the times when it comes to accepting female professionals. A 2015 study by BIMCO, the world’s largest direct-membership organization for ship owners, charterers, ship brokers and agents, and the International Chamber of Shipping found that women represented only 2 percent of professional seafarers worldwide. The problem isn’t just that there aren’t enough women working in the industry; it’s also that the culture can be misogynistic and hostile to those few who stick it out.

Experts say that a minority needs to make up at least 20 percent of a team in order to shift the culture. Some marine professions are predominantly female, but as a whole, the industry isn’t close to that threshold, which creates a catch-22. How do you get more female participants in order to improve the industry culture if the industry culture is too sexist to attract female participants?

Making changes is more than a social responsibility for marine businesses. It’s critical to the bottom line.

“[Other industries] are investing insane budgets into diversity and inclusion,” says Jenny Matthews, co-founder of She of the Sea, an organization working to improve diversity in the marine industry. “It’s a highly competitive landscape where innovation, engagement, longevity and better decision-making are all to be gained. Homogeneous workplaces just aren’t able to perform in those areas the way diverse ones are.”

She of the Sea does advocacy work demonstrating to the decision-makers of the marine world that women and other underrepresented groups are important investments for their businesses. “[Researchers] started off with asking, Does diversity matter or not? Is it good or bad for a company? But actually, in the last few years, they’ve moved on to measuring the difference in performance and the competitive edge that’s been gained,” Matthews says. “Across every single measurable [key performance indicator], it’s improved, and that’s only when we look at gender. When we include race, it’s even better.”

In fact, organizations with inclusive cultures are twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets, three times as likely to be high-performing, and six times more likely to be innovative and agile, according to figures from Deloitte.

However, there’s no simple checklist for how to fix gender bias. “It doesn’t happen overnight. It’s a long journey that’s always evolving, which is why the checklist approach doesn’t work,” Matthews says.

Misogyny, defined as dislike of or contempt toward women, is simpler to address than systemic issues. We can call out sexist remarks, unlearn our own prejudices, respect our female colleagues, have female representation in high-visibility positions — all familiar anti-sexism activities.

The systemic issues take a bit more creativity, often requiring a deep and vulnerable examination of both the status quo and the industry’s unique challenges that compound issues of inequality.

For example, one barrier inadvertently built into the marine world is the case of foul-weather gear. Most men don’t think twice about it, but finding foul-weather and safety gear in sizes and shapes that fit women can be a challenge. One former buyer for Defender pointed out that manufacturers just don’t make as much money on women’s gear, so runs are limited, especially on plus sizes and specialty gear.

At first glance, this may seem like the trivial result of a few companies prioritizing their bottom lines, but the ripple effect is significant. In addition to being a legitimate safety concern, not having proper gear may, for example, discourage a woman from doing deliveries, resulting in less time spent on the water or networking than her male peers.

Sailing instructor Marla Hedman also points out that her personal foul-weather gear — cobbled together from “golf shops, ski shops, work clothing and some sailing brands” — undermines her credibility because she can’t look professional around her students. “I’m a former athlete and a very knowledgeable sailor. I just don’t have the desired body shape and size,” she says.

For years, gear companies reinforced the expectation of what an expert looked like by limiting who could stay safe and dry on the water. The relatively small percentage of female boaters justified an equipment scarcity that further deterred female boaters. In recent years, many brands have made efforts to do better, recognizing that “shrink it and pink it” wasn’t good enough. Specialty gear such as dry suits, salopettes and dinghy booties remains elusive, but things such as Helly Hansen’s comprehensive “find your fit” tool represent great strides in acknowledging body diversity and correcting the issue.

Still, female yacht brokers are regularly mistaken for secretaries. Female voices over the VHF radio are not acknowledged as captains. Female bodies are required to be a certain size in order to be professional. It’s death by a thousand cuts to countless careers.

Removing systemic issues and unlearning misogyny isn’t a matter of men versus women. It’s something everyone can and should be conscious of, if not for the fact that women deserve equality, then as a matter of good business. (Editors note: June’s AIM Women in the Industry Virtual Breakfast was streamed by more than 380 attendees in 10 countries, 90 percent of whom were women.)

We need to hire more women to shift the culture. We need to call out sexism when we see it. We need to examine the structures of inequity within the industry and find solutions specific to our businesses.

So rarely is the right thing to do also the smart business decision, but diversity may be as close to a panacea as exists. It’s time to make a meaningful change — and probably a profit, too.

More than 100 women wrote in to share their stories for this article.

These are some of their experiences. Because of concerns for professional privacy, names have been omitted.

- Listening to the grief women get on the VHF radio is mind-blowing, especially the sailing captains.
- Taunting and harassing, sometimes dudes will key the mic and broadcast a tape of babies crying.
- Online boating communities can be even more toxic than the in-person ones. One person posted: Has anyone here brought a dog on board? The reply: Who cares what she looks like if she can cook?
- As a yacht broker, I have to say my clients have been great. I can’t say the same for male yacht brokers, however, with few exceptions. I’ve been asked to make the beds at the boat show — where another broker had been sleeping!
- Years ago, I was interviewing for a job on a sailing yacht. One of the interview questions was, “What size clothing do you wear?” I asked why this information was necessary. The response was, “We only have size-2 uniforms on board.”
- Last month, I was delivering a client’s million-dollar powerboat. We docked at the marina to fuel up, and my crew was on the bridge. I jumped off and tied the boat off in a cross breeze.

There were three guys watching, and one of them yells, “Man, your wife is awesome!” My crew yells back, “Wife? That’s my boss!”

- Every time I tried to crew, come nighttime it was all about trying to f**k me. No matter that I was in a relationship with a woman. That’s why I don’t sail at all anymore.
- I was trying to get a crew position in St. Thomas years ago, but only found “screw or swim” offers.
- I was in the pit, and the halyard wasn’t budging on this 50-footer, no matter how much strength I leaned into the winch handle with. The skipper screamed, “Get a man on that winch!” We got back to the dock, and one of the crew and I took the winch apart. Every gear in it was stripped by my heavy hand.
- The man is assumed to be the captain, regardless of who owns the boat, who has a license or who is explicitly referenced with the title.
- I was fired from my job as a deckhand for not shaving my legs.
- After many years of anchoring in all sorts of situations, I was aboard a friend’s boat for a day sail. As we approached the anchorage, he asked me to do the anchoring duties. I went forward, prepared the anchor and rode, and signaled the helmsman toward a good anchoring spot. As the boat stopped and I prepared to lower the anchor, a male guest who had no boating experience ran up, literally grabbed the anchor out of my hands and threw it overboard with all the line in a lump. The boat’s owner said, “WTF!” and the guy said, “But why was a girl doing it?”

Lydia Mullan is managing editor of Sail, a sister magazine to Soundings Trade Only. This article was originally published in the August 2021 issue and republished in Soundings Trade Only on July 23, 2021.