

Women at sea should be treated as equals

RECENTLY I visited the Port of Rotterdam, where one of our volunteers is a serving chief officer who is on leave. During her time ashore she welcomes visiting seafarers to the centre. As a female working at sea her views of life on board are very different from those of most seafarers I have encountered. In order to preserve her anonymity, I shall refer to her as Mary.

Mary told me that there was widespread understanding that to earn the respect of her fellow crew she had to work so much harder to 'prove herself'. Also, she said, others often thought that physically she couldn't cope with the job, that mentally she was weak, and that her presence on board was disruptive because her femininity was distracting – which meant that crew vied for her attentions, and jealousy was rife on board.

She was, she said, always being judged by standards that crew would not apply to themselves or any other male on board. Bullying and harassment seemed to be an occupational

hazard for female crew, and sexual innuendo, suggestions, and thoughts as to her 'availability' were daily occurrences.

It is clear that, in this environment, Mary is singled out for special attention, unwelcomed special attention. If Mary was a male, she would be a well-respected professional, recognised for her efficiency and effectiveness. Mary's leadership qualities are outstanding and fortunately someone in the senior management of the company recognises her competencies, realises that she brings a great deal of experience to the job and has a skill set that is of high quality. This means that in spite of the difficulties of life on board she really makes a big difference to the safe operation of the ship, is held in high regard by management and offers significant 'value added' to the company.

I am genuinely surprised that Mary has such a tough time on board. In my experience, crew have always been welcoming and inclusive. All crew are in the same position of being among others from different countries and cultures.

So why is it that acceptance on board stops short of including females as equals and colleagues to be respected and admired?

In the Christian scriptures women are not only regarded as very important but have a special place in God's plan for the world. Jesus has the highest regard for women and the most significant among them have been faithful in their relationship with Him. Commitment, dedication, and sensitive understanding were the hall marks of all of those whom Jesus gathered around Him, people who offered strength, wisdom and great guidance.

Without women, God's gift of creation would be so much diminished. The respect due to Mary, as the Mother of Our Lord, singles her out not as weak, vulnerable or unable to 'pull her weight', but as someone able to offer a great contribution for the benefit of all; a contribution which was selfless, brave and totally faithful to the highest of ideals.

Women are to be respected and admired – perhaps that is why I chose the name of Mary for our seafaring volunteer.