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### **The Indian Facet of Women at Sea – Strategies for success**

Capt. KARTHIK. K \* Professor, Nautical Science, AMET University

The career development of women is an important issue while opting for a career at sea. The career development can be divided into four stages:

1. The early career foundation when one comes out of an academy and enters an organisation, usually in their 20's.
2. The mid-career build up, when a person gets groomed for higher positions, during early 30's.
3. Career growth at senior levels, when a person is moved to positions of independent in charge at late 30's or early 40's
4. The crowning of a successful career with the person occupying the top position of a whole enterprise.

During the early career growth the main problem that comes up is at the time of marriage, when a woman's husband is in a different location. Since one of them has to move from his or her present location. It is often the woman who has to make the change which is an age old tradition in India. In fact, it is in her 20's that a woman has to put her best efforts to create a good initial track record in an organization, to build up her career later. She has to demonstrate her drive and initiative so that her capability to push and get things done is not doubted.

It is during the second stage, namely in middle management and in the age span of 30's, that the major problem for career development of woman arises. This is when the children arrive. Unless one has help at home in the form of elders who are willing to take care of the children, the women generally faces the problem of a break in her mid-career. On the other hand, this is just the time when her male colleagues are getting exposed to different functional responsibilities, which is the critical input to career at this stage.

Basically it is more of a biological problem which hampers women from taking up a maritime career involving labor and industry. Survey statistics expounds a generic trend that half of the Indian women who take maternity leave return to their jobs late or not at all. The real problem for organisation in such case is the “women power planning” that has to be done to provide for the mid-career break and resumption of the same subsequently, they have to keep in touch with women officers who left earlier, to relocate them and bring them back into the mainstream later. Holding senior positions takes its toll on women, in respect of the time they can give to their growing children at home.

This is true of men as well. But with both pursuing their careers vigorously, the time available for children from the parents becomes alarmingly low and especially with their mother away the children feel rudderless and the home is in disarray. One problem that many young women encounter is the degree of assertiveness they can demonstrate in the workplace. A woman officer who has sought employment in a traditionally masculine career is faced with a dilemma. If she exhibits feminine traits of being expressive, nurturing or sympathetic she is perceived as “too soft”, “not tough enough” to be at sea. This way her confidence suffers and affects her ability to work effectively. On the other hand, if she shows what are considered typical masculine traits such as dominance, control or hard hitting logic, she is made to feel as if she is being too masculine and too aggressive. These perceptions affect her sense of femininity and made her that she is in some way rendered less of a woman by displaying these traits. For example, some women have difficulty in expressing anger in public, or stating an opinion forcefully in male dominated debates.

Others hesitate to delegate work to make subordinates (and end up doing it themselves), while yet others find that they cannot express dissatisfaction freely, for example firing a subordinate for a job badly done. Many are unwilling to pay the price of assertiveness which could involve loss of popularity, exclusion from male camaraderie etc. After all its is simpler to charm that to compound. It is equally true that many women unconsciously invite stereotyping from their colleagues by their behavior. They reinforce the status of male-leader, fe-male-follower in many ways particularly in their speech and language patterns.

For example

- A. By using overly polite speech (“would you be so kind as to...”)
- B. By frequently endorsing or supporting men’s opinions.

On the other hand, men often tend to use speech patterns and language to establish their dominant status (especially in a group). They do this by talking louder, talking “over” or by

changing female initiated subjects, ignoring or interrupting women or simply forcing them into passive listening roles once more relegating them to secondary non-powerful positions. There should be radical change in the women opting for a career at sea in their ways of speaking and behaving if they wish to underline their equal status.

The women at sea should be conscious about the following:

- a) To recognise language and speech pattern that invite stereotyping and to change them.
- b) To address self-defeating thoughts that stop risk-taking or assertive behavior and deal with them squarely.
- c) To get honest feedback about assertive behavior whenever possible.
- d) To anticipate difficult situations and pre-prepare for them through role play or role rehearsal.
- e) To set verbal and behavioral limits in the workplace ( especially sexual ones)
- f) To evolve a support group of peers who share similar problems elsewhere.
- g) To increase exposure to female role models: senior experienced women who have successfully dealt with similar problems.

There are instances of top women officers from various nationalities who are doing very well and who are practically adored by people in their organizations. They have a fine sensitivity to people and matters, having come through the fire. A pool of such exemplary women officers at sea can be garnered and their experiences can be used to guide the budding women officers in their sea careers. This probably is one role which is yet to be performed in an adequate and impressive manner. It may be necessary for them to evolve ways of guiding both men and women in their organisations as to how they can harmonise their efforts. It is here that the successful women at sea have a big role to play in the future for the women posterity.

To conclude aspiring women cadets, if they wish to evolve into an effective leader, they will need to become more assertive, more forceful in their exercise of legitimate power and authority and should be completely aware about the sacrifices (family, friends and festivals etc..) they are faced with because of choosing a career at sea. This will entail a greater responsibility in their parenting, maritime counseling, and organisational support, social and cultural acceptance.

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