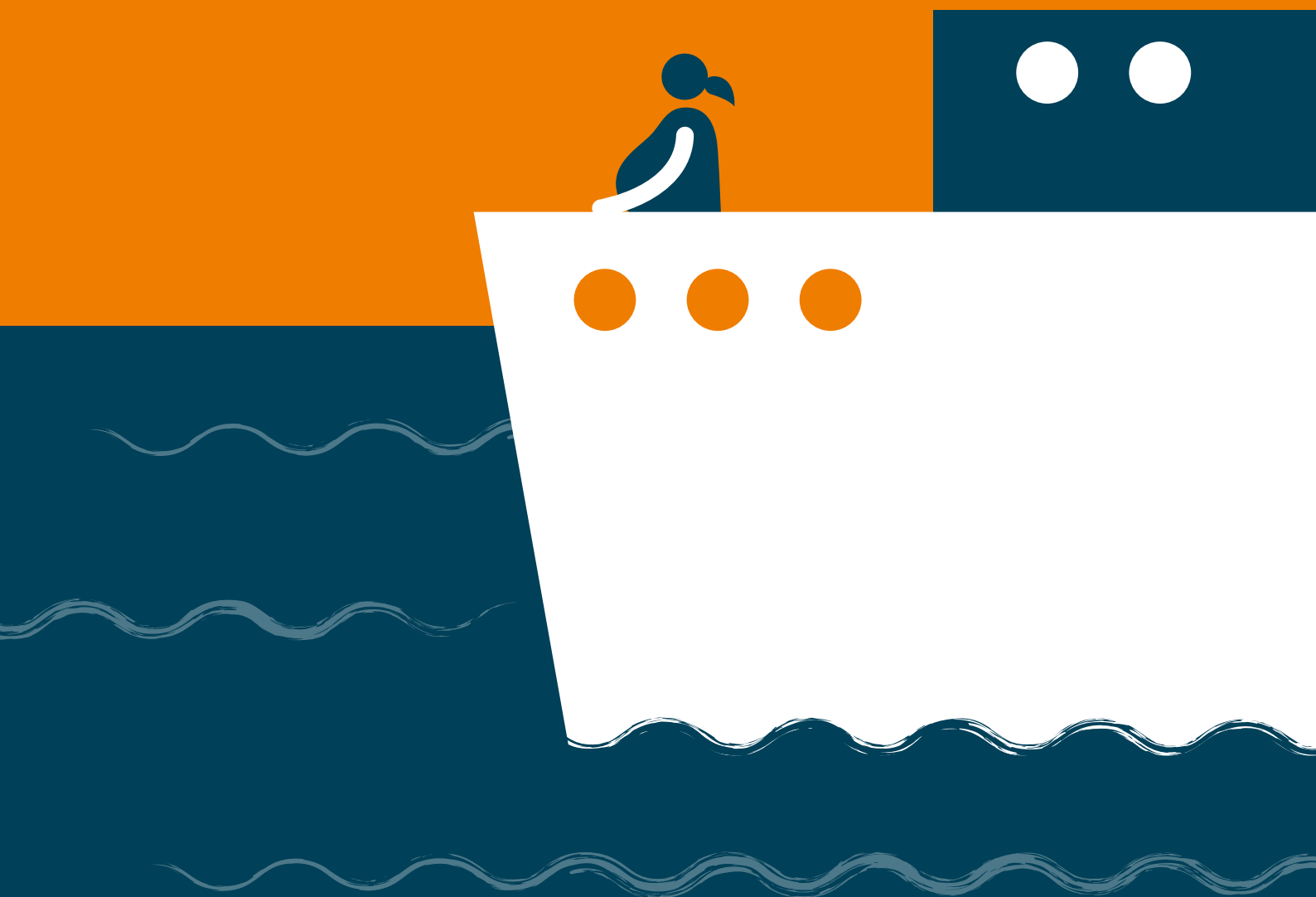




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Pregnancy at sea: From hidden risk to retention edge

A value proposition for the maritime industry



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Aknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr John Howe (Co-Founder and Chief Operating Officer, Pontis Medical Limited) and Tatjana Marojević, RN (Vice President, UNIMED) for their medical assessments, and to Mimi Schupler (Global HR Advisor and Consultant) for facilitating their contributions.

The author wishes to thank TURTLE for its long-standing support for this project, as well as the All Aboard Alliance member companies that assisted in reaching additional participants.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors alone and not the views of the Global Maritime Forum, the All Aboard Alliance, or its member companies.

Credits

Layout and design by housatonic.eu

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Executive summary

Pregnancy is not an exceptional event; it is a normal part of working life that companies should be prepared for. At sea, however, its handling is still largely improvised.

Fifteen women of eight nationalities, working across six vessel types and ranks from cadet to master, shared their experiences of pregnancy at sea. Their stories revealed a consistent pattern: what should be a routine, manageable process is often left to chance.

Because women remain underrepresented at sea, opportunities to learn systematically from their experiences have been limited. To build a clearer picture, the findings were mapped into seven stages of the pregnancy journey: prior, discovery, disclosure, work while pregnant, repatriation, leave, and return. This structure shows how decisions in one stage shape the next and highlights the gap between current practice and what “good” looks like. Silence or improvised responses often pushed women out of the industry, while modest, consistent practices enabled safety and retention.

For a sector already under pressure from talent shortages, attrition, and growing expectations on human sustainability, better pregnancy policies and practices are not only a matter of fairness but a strategic challenge for safety, retention, and reputation.

Throughout the interviews, four themes emerged with striking consistency:

- **Pregnancy is predictable, but its handling is improvised.** Each case became a different experiment in pregnancy testing, disclosure, leave, and return. The absence of standard practice left crews and companies exposed.
- **Silence is the dominant risk factor.** The lack of clear policies, procedures, or designated contacts created a vacuum in which women concealed pregnancies, delayed medical care, and faced abrupt exits.
- **Retention, safety, and reputation intersect.** Practices that support women (risk-based duty adjustments on board, planned timelines for repatriation, pay continuity, and defined re-entry pathways) kept experienced officers in maritime careers and reduced emergency evacuations, concealed pregnancies, and liability risk.
- **Solutions are simple and already exist.** Weekly risk checks, modest duty adjustments, personalised voyage lengths, and human follow-up made it possible for women to work safely into the second and third trimester and to return with pride and confidence.

Normalising pregnancy at sea requires open communication and embedding clear procedures into contracts, safety manuals, and human resources policies so outcomes do not depend on individual discretion.

The creation of safe, consistent, and empathetic pregnancy procedures is not a favour to women; it is a practical value proposition for the maritime sector. With modest effort and limited cost, the industry can retain experience, reduce emergencies, and demonstrate that it offers a modern, responsible career path for all. Maritime companies succeed when they look after their people. Designing a positive pregnancy journey that supports current and future mothers strengthens safety, stabilises crews, and broadens the talent pipeline. The evidence is clear, and so is the opportunity: by moving from silence to structure, the maritime sector can turn a hidden risk into a retention edge.



Snapshot in numbers

- **Participants:** 15
- **Nationalities represented:** 8 - Turkish, Filipino, American, Indian, Latvian, British, German, South African
- **Age at first pregnancy (where known):** 21–34 (median 26; n=10 with age data)
- **Total years at sea at the time (where known):** 2.5–21 (median 10; n=15)
- **Operating patterns captured:** short-cycle rotations (1–2 weeks on/2 off), mid-cycle (28 days on/28 off; 5 weeks on/5 off), and voyage contracts (4–6 months on), including extended hitches (8 months on)
- **Status today:** 5 at sea (active); 2 intend to return to sea (currently not sailing); 6 in shore roles (including 1 seeking a job ashore); 2 have left the industry

Current pregnancy at sea journey

"I can't find any information or policies about how pregnancy is treated or my rights. The entire subject seems taboo and is never discussed."



1. Prior

"There's no discreet way to test on board, so I wait for shore or ask around quietly. I'm worried about gossip, or even that I might lose my contract. Patchy internet makes even basic planning hard."



2. Discovery

"Telling someone feels like spinning a wheel. Will I be removed? Will everyone know? I choose my words and timing carefully because one misstep could mean a pay cliff."



3. Disclosure

"I keep doing my job and managing risk informally. Support changes with each rotation; what's allowed one week isn't the next. Sometimes I hide the pregnancy to protect my income."



4. Work while pregnant

"Travel is arranged, but what happens to pay, benefits, and next steps is murky. The company doesn't seem to know what should happen. Will I lose my income? I feel uncertain about the future."



5. Repatriation

"I go home without pay, benefits, or clear timelines. Contact drops off, and I'm rarely offered ways to stay involved. I miss the ship and worry my skills and my licence are slipping."



6. Leave

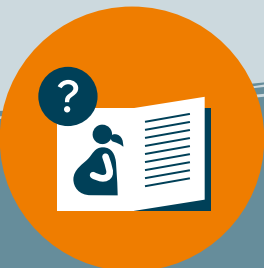
"The company has not presented a clear route back, and I don't know what to do about childcare or lactation. I feel pushed to return early to make ends meet, and wonder whether I need to change careers."



7. Return to work

Better pregnancy at sea journey

"Safety briefings normalise pregnancy from day one. I can find clear information about my rights at every stage and know exactly who to contact without triggering a ton of paperwork."



1. Prior

"There's a discreet pregnancy test on board, and if I need a scan, the company helps book one at the next safe port. I can ask questions through a confidential channel, knowing my contract isn't at risk."



2. Discovery

"The process is clear and standard, so I choose when to disclose. The first response is supportive. I hear, 'Let's make a plan together,' and my privacy, wages, and promotion path are protected."



3. Disclosure

"After a medical check, I'm kept on board, and my job is adjusted through a simple conversation and risk assessment. The crew knows how to help without sidelining me, and basic needs are handled without fuss."



4. Work while pregnant

"Sign-off is planned early and communicated clearly. I'm briefed on pay and benefits, and my departure feels respectful. Options for shore or remote work are already mapped."



5. Repatriation

"Pay continues long enough for me to recover and bond with my baby. My licence and seniority are safeguarded. I'm offered optional tasks to keep skills fresh, and parenting support is available."



6. Leave

"Before sailing, we check if I'm physically and mentally ready to return. Flexible options are on the table, and appropriate facilities are ready. Everything is captured in a written return plan."



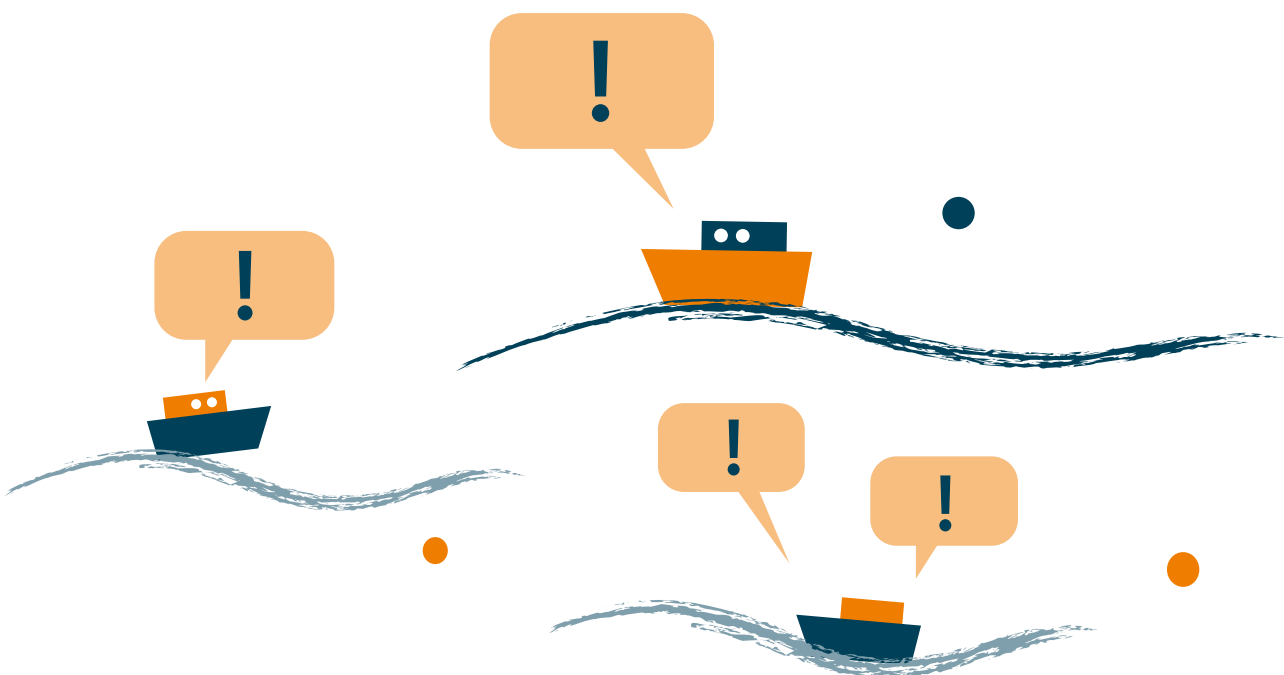
7. Return to work

Deep dive into pregnancy at sea stages

Pregnancy at sea is not a single event but a progression of decisions and interactions that unfold across time. The lived experiences that 15 women shared in their interviews have been mapped into seven stages: from the period before a pregnancy is known, through discovery, disclosure, working at sea while pregnant, repatriation, leave, and returning to work.

At every step, different actors influence outcomes. The seafarer herself makes decisions about disclosure, health, and career. The captain is often the first authority to respond, setting the immediate tone and practical conditions. Crewing managers and HR determine contracts, pay, and whether a seat is held open. The doctor or medical advisor interprets health risks and can overrule others. Peers and crewmates offer emotional and practical support, or in some cases, amplify stigma. Beyond the vessel, family members, unions, and welfare organisations provide advice, childcare, and advocacy.

By following these stages and recognising the interplay of actors, the analysis shows how a pregnancy can be managed with dignity and safety, or conversely, how silence, unclear policies, and financial insecurity can drive secrecy and force women out of the industry. The pages that follow dive into each stage, illustrating both pain points and bright spots through the words of the women themselves.





1. Prior



2. Discovery



3. Disclosure



4. Working while pregnant



5. Repatriation



6. Leave



7. Return to work



Stage 1 – PRIOR

This stage captures everything that precedes a positive pregnancy test or formal disclosure: contracts, work culture, self-identity, and, crucially, whether any reproductive health or pregnancy policy exists.

Key findings

Before a pregnancy is even confirmed, gaps in reproductive health and company guidance already shape women's experiences at sea. Several interviewees described searching their company manuals in vain, finding nothing about pregnancy or even who to inform. These silences become more than administrative oversights when urgent needs arise. One officer recounted the profound vulnerability of finding no emergency contraception on board: *"There was no morning-after pill on board, and I got it only four days after. I don't know who could have helped me; I still don't know to this day. I did not trust the captain,"* ID1 said. The absence of basic reproductive care creates a sense of isolation and signals that pregnancy itself may also be unsupported.

To protect the anonymity of the 15 women who participated in this study, they are referred to only by the order of their interviews throughout this report.

Trust in leadership, particularly the captain, is decisive in whether women feel safe to disclose or seek help. ID1 described a hostile command climate in which the captain *"yelled and gave improper tasks,"* making disclosure unthinkable. In contrast, others emphasised how trust could make all the difference. ID4 recalled being hesitant to share her pregnancy but reassured by the personality of her captain: *"I wasn't worried about the way he would react because he was somebody I trusted, who I got along well with, and worked well with."* These contrasting accounts show how much rests on individual relationships when formal guidance is absent.

Alongside these risks, the interviews revealed the deep personal stakes of pregnancy for seafarers. Many held a strong seafaring identity that shaped how they processed the possibility of stepping away. *"I could have seen myself for the next, I don't know, ten years at sea probably. I never knew anything else,"* ID6 said. This was echoed by ID3: *"It's my job, my career, my profession. It's not just that I put food on the table – shipping is such an identity; it's such a lifestyle."*

The stakes are even higher for women who struggled to break into the profession. ID9 recalled being rejected outright at agencies because they were *“not accepting females”*. Having fought to secure their place, the prospect of being asked to step aside during pregnancy carries an added weight. Yet, there are glimpses of what supportive practice can look like. ID11’s company arranged an early sign-off so she could attend a close friend’s wedding. Small acts of flexibility like this create a foundation of trust that makes later conversations about pregnancy safer and more constructive.

Pain points

- **No clear information:** Multiple interviewees couldn’t find clear guidance in company materials or their contracts. (IDs 3, 6, 8). None of the women reported being briefed during induction or safety training on what happens if you get pregnant at sea.
- **Unsupportive command climates deter women from seeking help early:** When captains are perceived as punitive or dismissive (ID1), women quickly assume that disclosure is risky.
- **Reproductive care is not treated as safety-critical provisioning:** The absence of emergency contraception and pregnancy tests signals a policy blind spot.
- **Entry discrimination narrows fallback options:** Women who had to fight for their position face a sharper identity crisis when pregnancy occurs (ID9).

Bright points

- **Personalised rostering and leave flexibility:** Early demonstrations of trust and flexibility create psychological safety that will matter later. (ID11)
- **Partners and peers act as early emotional anchors:** While informal, these supports buffered anxiety and enabled more deliberate decisions. (IDs 6, 12)
- **Previous known cases normalise pregnancy at sea:** *“My mom was captain... when she was pregnant with me.”* (ID7) History doesn’t replace policy, but it does reduce stigma.



Lessons for maritime leaders

The “prior” stage reveals the need for organisational preparedness. When it comes to pregnancy at sea, silence is too often the dominant feature: silence in onboard manuals and inductions, in medical chest lists, and sometimes in leadership behaviour. That silence pushes risk underground and creates unnecessary barriers long before anyone takes a pregnancy test.



Stage 2 – DISCOVERY

This stage captures the moment pregnancy is first suspected or confirmed: access to a test¹, privacy concerns, initial emotions, and the immediate question of whether to disclose or delay. It is also where bureaucratic friction, poor connectivity, and income insecurity begin to shape health and safety decisions.

Key findings

The first challenge many women faced was simply confirming their pregnancy. Several described ships where no pregnancy test was available at all, or where access meant leaving a paper trail that stripped away privacy. For some, the fact that there was only one woman on board made anonymity impossible.

“If I’m the only woman and there’s a test missing, you know who took it,” ID12 explained. In the most extreme case, ID7 recalled being unable to disembark: *“There was no pregnancy test on board, and we couldn’t get off the vessel because of COVID restrictions. By the time I actually got off, I was already past the first trimester.”* When something as basic as a pregnancy test is out of reach, every other step is affected.

Even when a test was possible, the next barrier was the company system. Several women described how bureaucracy and command culture created fear rather than support. *“There is a ton of paperwork for anything, even a Band-Aid, and I didn’t want to start all that just for a test,”* ID3 explained. In such environments, a pregnancy can feel like the start of a bureaucratic chain reaction that risks career and reputation.

Faced with this, many chose to delay or conceal their situation, a choice often driven as much by money as by mistrust. *“I basically knew that the minute I stop working, my salary stops,”* ID15 said. ID7 echoed the same anxiety, asking, *“How do you make a paycheck while you’re not on the boat?”* Without maternity pay or job protection, financial insecurity forced women to carry their pregnancy in silence well beyond the point that is medically advisable.

“I took a test, and I did not expect it to be positive. I think my jaw hit the floor and stayed there for about five minutes. It was just shock and amazement and all these different feelings at once and a little bit of helplessness, not knowing what to do. In that moment, your life changes. You’re one way one minute and then you’re a completely different person the next minute. It was all these different feelings happening at once, including sadness, honestly, because I knew I wouldn’t be able to have that job and also have a family. I would have to make a choice.” – ID4

¹ Pregnancy test availability varies by flag state; however, EU occupational and reproductive health standards recommend private pregnancy test access and some EU states mandate contraception in maritime medicine kits.

Without prenatal care, women worried about what could happen if complications arose at sea. *“It really isn’t ideal to sail until 22 weeks with zero prenatal care,”* ID3 said. *“What if it’s ectopic or I miscarry?”* In the absence of structured support, women instead turned to peers or unions. ID3 described asking a friend to buy her a pregnancy test and slip it to her at the pier. The same officer later sought guidance from her union’s women’s caucus: *“I sent them a picture of the test and asked, ‘What are my rights? What do I do?’”* These informal networks often provided the only immediate clarity or reassurance. But because they were ad hoc and dependent on individual initiative, support was patchy, leaving women to navigate one of the most critical health moments of their lives without a reliable system behind them.²

Pain points

- **No discreet access to tests on board:** Pregnancy tests are often absent or only available via logged access, which deters early action (IDs 1, 7, 8, 12).
- **Paperwork and punitive culture:** Fear of forms and gossip stalls disclosure and pushes women to avoid company channels (IDs 3, 12).
- **No immediate, confidential next step:** After a positive test, there is rarely a clear, private pathway for advice or medical confirmation (IDs 3, 11). Seafarers self-diagnose for weeks.
- **Income jeopardy:** Where maternity provisions are absent or unclear, seafarers choose to hide their pregnancy to keep their wages (e.g., IDs 7, 15).

Bright points

- **Rapid rights guidance from trusted intermediaries:** Union support provided immediate clarity when company policy was opaque. *“My union women’s caucus told me, ‘Sit tight, you don’t really have to tell them anything yet.’”* (ID3)
- **Clinician judged task-specific risks:** A doctor issued a fit-for-duty certificate where deck-side duties were assessed as safe, proving risk can be managed rather than defaulting to repatriation. (IDs 7, 12)
- **Reliable connectivity helps:** Solid internet lets seafarers check symptoms, contact family/ union discreetly, arrange care at the next port, and reduce the panic that comes with uncertainty. (e.g., ID4)



Lessons for maritime leaders

Discovery is the first safety-critical decision point, and on many vessels, it is handled informally, invisibly, and late. The absence of a private test, the fear of triggering bureaucracy, and the lack of an immediate, confidential path after a positive result mean that women keep sailing without prenatal care, delay disclosure to protect income, and rely on friends and unions to navigate what should be a company duty.

The solutions here are straightforward: discreet tests, a confidential first conversation, and a non-punitive early response. Where those elements appeared, through unions, masters, or pragmatic doctors, women navigated the discovery period more safely and calmly. Where they didn’t, they improvised.

² Early early prenatal risk screening (e.g., ectopic pregnancy, hypertension) can be life-threatening if delayed.



Stage 3 - DISCLOSURE

This stage captures the moment (and manner) in which a seafarer tells a person in authority that she is pregnant. Disclosures ranged from five weeks (ID10) to 30 weeks (ID15) and could be directed to a captain, crewing manager, or HR. Reactions at this stage set the psychological tone of the entire journey: some women felt instantly supported, while others lost income or were removed from the vessel within 48 hours.

Key findings

The moment a pregnancy is disclosed at sea often comes down to the personality of the captain. With no written procedures in place, their reaction can determine whether a woman feels safe or rejected. For some, disclosure brought reassurance. ID3 recalled her captain being **“very excited,”** asking, **“What do you need? Do you need to change your watch?”** For others, it was the opposite. ID15 described calling her captain, only to have him hang up in shock before phoning back later to apologise. This “policy by personality” approach leaves women vulnerable to chance rather than supported by a reliable system.

“I had to work up the courage to tell my captain, which wasn't necessary. He wasn't mad or anything, not that he would be mad, but I was a little scared to tell him. I only wanted to tell him because I wasn't sure if there were company policies or anything that I had to follow up on. So, I told him after a few days, and he was very excited for me.” – ID3

Uncertainty about company policies meant that many delayed disclosing their pregnancy until they felt sure of the outcome. This silence wasn't about privacy alone; it reflected a deeper calculation about trust. Without knowing how their employer would respond, women chose secrecy, a choice that postpones crew planning and raises health and safety risks.

“I was hesitant to tell because I didn't want anybody to know yet. I didn't know if that was something that he would have to share with the company, and I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't worried about the way he would react because he was somebody I trusted, got along well with, and worked well with. I asked him if I needed to go see a doctor or something, and he was like, ‘Oh, you don't have to do anything.’ So it was kind of a big secret between my husband, my sister, and my captain for a few weeks. I think I was about 16 weeks along when I finally told the company.” – ID4

For those who did speak up, the consequences were often harsh. Disclosure could mean being removed from the vessel with no income and no alternative work. **“I suddenly became jobless during my pregnancy; there was a lot of uncertainty,”** said ID12. Another officer, ID8, thought she was doing the right thing by informing the company early, only to be repatriated within days: **“I thought I was being prudent by telling them early. I got kicked off after two days.”**

Yet the data also show the opposite is possible. When job security is clearly guaranteed, the stress drops away. ID5 recalled being reassured. *“They sent me the message that my seat is still available. They said, ‘If you want to join back with us, you can come back at the same rank you were on.’ My employment was guaranteed,”* she said. Such guarantees transformed disclosure from a career-ending threat into a manageable life event.

Pain points	Bright points
● No standard script or checklist: Masters and HR improvise responses; outcomes vary from congratulatory gestures (ID4) to instant termination (ID2). ● Income cliff edge for non-permanent contracts: Unless on a permanent contract, pay stops the day a woman steps off the gangway (IDs 2, 15), incentivising concealment. ● Rigid, context-blind policies: A near-coastal dredger 30 min from shore (ID12) was treated the same as a deep water tanker; context matters. ● Captains' fear of liability: Some masters push immediate repatriation (ID6) to “play it safe,” even when the risk is low and the woman prefers to finish her rotation.	● Empathetic frontline leaders who rearrange watches on the spot (ID3) or secure time off to inform family (ID8). ● Warm symbolic gestures signal belonging: <i>“They even sent me a children’s book with all the different kinds of vessels.”</i> (ID7) ● Guaranteed job security policies that promise rank retention for up to three years eliminate the career loss panic (ID5). ● Two-way planning between the seafarer and master or crewing manager about the timing of relief (ID7) shows disclosure can enhance, not hinder, operations.



Lessons for maritime leaders

Policy silence equals managerial roulette. When a pregnant seafarer speaks up, the company’s entire culture is often revealed by the initial reaction. In strong cases, a captain’s empathy and a crewing manager’s planning convert a vulnerable conversation into a risk-based, confidential plan within hours. In weak cases, policy opacity, blanket removal, and income shocks push women into secrecy or exit. A fair system ensures that support does not hinge on luck or discretion, but on clear and consistent procedures. If leaders want fewer hidden pregnancies and stronger retention, disclosure must reliably trigger acknowledgement, privacy, and a documented pathway.



Stage 4 - WORKING WHILE PREGNANT

This stage captures how women manage work during pregnancy. For those who disclose, it includes day-to-day duty adjustments, risk assessments, role changes, watch cover, and medical checks. For those who conceal, it often means carrying the full emotional and financial load in silence. Eleven of the 15 interviewees continued working for at least one full rotation after they knew they were pregnant; five concealed the pregnancy at least through the end of the first trimester, with one keeping hers secret beyond the seventh month.

Key findings

For many women, the decision to hide a pregnancy was driven by economics. Without maternity pay or the option of alternative work, disclosing the truth could mean losing all income overnight. ID7 put it plainly: ***"As soon as you're not on the boat, you're not being paid, so I didn't tell anyone."*** ID15 described hiding her pregnancy for seven and a half months for the same reason: ***"My salary stops the minute I get off."*** Secrecy became a rational response to the financial risks created by company policies.

When support and flexibility were available, some women continued working safely well into their pregnancies. These women described having relatively easy pregnancies with few symptoms, and their duties were reviewed regularly. Adjustments such as changing watch schedules, adding relief officers, or regularly checking tasks against capability made a huge difference. ***"The company put an extra officer on board so I could stay till 34 weeks,"*** ID10 reported. For ID3, staying until 22 weeks was possible without feeling that the baby's health was at risk.



Importantly, this is never one-size-fits-all. Every pregnancy and role must be assessed individually with medical input and task-specific risk reviews. Many pregnancies involve significant symptoms that can make continued sea work unsafe or impractical^{3,4}. These examples show what's possible under the right conditions, not a blanket rule.

The way risk was assessed varied dramatically. Some captains created space for regular conversations, while others had no structure at all. ID10 described a supportive practice: ***"There was always a discussion at the beginning of each week when I was on board. There was a discussion around tasks, the capability side of things. I was never not included."*** Yet ID3 highlighted the lack of a formal process: ***"There's literally no form for 'no longer fit for duty' when you're pregnant."*** Without corporate templates or guidelines, outcomes depended entirely on the initiative of individual leaders.

Connectivity also shaped the experience of pregnancy at sea. Where internet access was poor, anxiety grew. ***"The lack of connectivity in the beginning was hard because I couldn't research things. I would write down all my questions and send them to my husband in an email, and ask him to Google them,"*** ID3 said. In contrast, ID4 described a very different situation: ***"Research was very easy; we had really good internet."*** Good connectivity was not just about convenience; it was a low-cost way to ease uncertainty and support health literacy.

Even so, emotional isolation persisted across contexts. Women described carrying the mental and physical burden of pregnancy largely alone, with little structured psychological support available. Peer empathy helped, but without formal channels, much of the strain remained invisible to managers.

"My biggest challenge was being away from all my loved ones during that time. It was a happy time, but there was a little bit of grief too. There were times when I felt very isolated, very lonely. And there were lots of times where it would have been nice to just talk to somebody, but you're at work and there's nobody to talk to who would get it. And I was a lot of times the only female on board. That was probably the biggest challenge - the isolation, which is a problem for seafarers anyway. But I always had a little buddy with me. I had my baby with me the whole time." – ID4



3 Ships are not equipped for obstetric or neonatal emergencies (e.g., ectopic pregnancy, severe hemorrhage, preterm labour), hence precautionary off-signing is medically justified.

4 Some pregnancies may deteriorate suddenly. Including a minimum onboard preparedness guideline, such as pregnancy tests, antihypertensives, and an emergency evacuation plan, can serve as an important safeguard.

Pain points

- **Isolation and lack of structured psychological support:** Women describe carrying the news alone, with no counselling or peer line at sea. "There were times I felt very isolated, very lonely." (ID4) "Am I making the correct decision? If I didn't have a healthy child, I'd wonder if it was because I was out there." (ID7) "I had this big secret that I was keeping." (ID4)
- **Concealment of pregnancy due to economic anxiety:** Income stops the moment you're off the boat, pushing secrecy and unsafe self-management. "I put on a brave face and worked; I didn't even want them to know I was pregnant." (ID3)
- **Crew change anxiety when captains rotate:** Support can vanish with a master change, creating pressure to keep performing rather than re-negotiate adjustments. "What if the new captain has a problem with this? There's no policy or precedent." (ID3)

Bright points

- **Supportive captain with collaborative risk assessment:** Regular, empathetic reviews made continuing to work feel safe and legitimate.⁵ "Week by week, we reviewed the risk assessment. He was very empathetic; we wrote it together." (ID8)
- **Practical duty/roster adjustments that preserve safety and pay:** Tweaks like moving pregnant workers off of night shifts or out of high-risk areas, and adding cover when needed, kept officers effective without penalty. "[The captain] said it is up to me to decide nights or days [...]" and the company put an extra officer on board." (ID10)
- **Clear medical sign-offs to reduce ambiguity⁶:** Timely doctor clearance enabled straightforward continuation without stigma. "There were no issues going back after I told them, but I did have to get a doctor's sign-off." (ID7)
- **Reliable connectivity:** Internet access supported pregnancy research, sustained family bonds, and reduced uncertainty and isolation. (ID 4)



Lessons for maritime leaders

The interviews dismantled a common myth: pregnancy does not have to automatically end a sea-going contract. With modest adaptations, like watch adjustments, risk check-ins, and ergonomic tweaks, many women in this study worked safely into the second and even third trimester.⁷

What undermines safety isn't pregnancy per se; it's unclear procedures, income risk that drives secrecy, and a lack of structural psychological support and reliable connectivity that leave women carrying the burden alone. This stage is where modest, consistent practices turn pregnancy from a hidden risk into a well-managed routine.

5 Formal weekly risk checks should cover specific occupational hazards (lifting, vibration, chemicals, radiation, heat, and night shifts), not just general well-being, as per European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) requirements. These should happen with ongoing medical oversight.

6 It's vital to establish clear escalation pathways and pre-agreed evacuation protocols, as pregnancy-related emergencies are highly time-sensitive and cannot depend on delayed or ad-hoc decision-making.

7 While individual cases reported later work, the medically accepted safe limit is 24–28 weeks, in line with International Labour Organization occupational health guidance and maritime medical standards (incl. flag state practices), due to risk of preterm labour and lack of obstetric capacity at sea.





Stage 5 - REPATRIATION

This stage captures the practical and emotional transition from ship to shore once pregnancy is known. It covers how and when sign-off is triggered, who makes the call (seafarer, captain, company doctor, or medical advisor), what happens to the seafarer's pay and role on their return home, and whether there are any concrete plans for the weeks that follow.

Key findings

The timing of repatriation shaped women's sense of safety and control. Where clear thresholds were agreed in advance, taking into account gestation, vessel type, and medical advice, seafarers could finish their rotations without unnecessary stress. ID7, for example, stayed until 33½ weeks on a near-coastal tug, while ID10 remained until 34 weeks with an extra officer on board. Both left later in their pregnancies without incident.

By contrast, blanket cut-offs or sudden removals created anxiety, signalling that decisions were being made about the women without their input.

"I told the company, and they said I can't go back to sea. They took away my sea-going allowance, they took away my ticket allowance, and then I was basically left with like 40% of my salary. It was so painful because they expected me to move from one province to another for an office job I didn't want. On top of that, they reduced my salary to basically nothing. They don't have any policies. They took a policy that they applied to female shore staff and applied it to me. The worst part was that I had no leave, I had no sick leave, I had to start from scratch. I hated the company. It was the hardest time of my life. And on top of that, I'm pregnant. So, it was just horrific." – ID15

How departures were handled also influenced crew culture. Some ships marked the moment with warmth and humour, reinforcing belonging rather than stigma.

"They did a little mock discharge paper for my baby showing how many days she was at sea. That was cool, so I'm glad I finally did say something," ID7 recalled with pride. Small rituals like this turned a potentially isolating event into a shared experience, strengthening team cohesion.

There were also examples of companies finding ways to keep women engaged after sign-off, offering short-term "bridge" roles that retained expertise, with some even allowed to work from home. Yet these positive cases stood in sharp contrast to others where repatriation came with abrupt pay cuts or loss of allowances. For ID15, this meant being left with only a fraction of her income: *"They took away my sea-going allowance; I was basically left with like 40% of my salary."* For these women, repatriation was not just a change of duty station but the start of financial and emotional hardship.

Pain points

- **No standard “exit kit”:** Women had their travel home booked but no briefing on maternity benefits, insurance, or next steps (IDs 11, 13).
- **Pay protection is patchy at best:** While some received their full salary working at home (ID11, protected by national law), others lost upwards of 60 % of their income (ID15) or lost their job altogether (ID2).
- **Crew emotional load unacknowledged:** One crew member admitted relief that *“she won’t have the baby on board”* (ID10). The comment reveals not just the obvious concern about delivery at sea, but a deeper fear that with no clear protocols, the emotional burden of “what if” falls on the crew, even when nothing goes wrong.

Bright points

- **Planned timelines:** Predictable rules let women complete deployments safely and confidently. (IDs 7, 10)
- **Respectful, needs-led master actions:** *“I told the master to arrange for repatriation.”* (ID13) The request was handled without judgment, with a medical check arranged promptly.
- **Recognition by crew:** Normalising pregnancy with empathetic gestures (e.g., mock discharge paper for the baby) reinforces belonging and breaks stigma. (ID7)
- **Remote/shore bridge assignments:** Paid, meaningful work immediately post-sign-off preserves income and keeps skills engaged. (IDs 5, 8)



Lessons for maritime leaders

How repatriation is treated will shape whether new mothers will return to sea. The difference between a dignified, planned exit and a costly and stressful one is rarely medical; it is organisational. Where timelines are known, captains act respectfully, and “bridge” roles exist, women can complete their contracts safely and stay connected. Where repatriation is triggered abruptly, salaries are cut, and uncertainty reigns, repatriation becomes the first step out of the industry.



Stage 6 - LEAVE

This stage captures the moment a seafarer steps ashore until her leave ends or she chooses never to sail again. It is the period when pay and insurance kick in (or don't), licenses lapse or are upgraded, new mothers weigh sea time requirements against child-rearing realities, and companies either keep a human asset psychologically connected or watch her drift away.

Key findings

For many women, their period ashore was marked first by uncertainty about what support, if any, they were entitled to. Not many had been briefed in advance on maternity rights or pay, leaving them to guess or assume the worst. *"I don't know if there is any support from the company,"* said ID1. ID2 echoed the same lack of clarity: *"I have a promised basic salary, but I still don't know when I'll get it."* Without reliable information, planning was difficult, and confidence in returning to sea weakened.

Financial pressure was a constant backdrop, often overriding medical guidance. Low or irregular wage replacement pushed women into risky choices such as concealing pregnancies longer, cutting leave short, or leaving the industry entirely. *"I was getting £140 a week [statutory maternity pay] and that was with a mortgage. The math didn't add up, so I had to go back,"* ID10 explained. For ID15, the situation was starker: *"At seven and a half months pregnant, there's no financial support; there's nothing."* Such financial cliffs created a situation where economics, not health or safety, dictated decisions.

"I do not feel done with shipping, and people are like, 'You're crazy. You're going to hold this baby, and it's going to be different,' which is potentially true. But I want to sail my chief mate's license. I want to get my master's license. I know that getting back out there is going to be harder and slower. My husband said, 'If you don't feel done, we'll have to find a way for childcare. It will be difficult, but we'll find a way.' So, my hope is that I can find a shorter contract to start with. It's my job, my career, my profession. My entire higher education has been in this. It's not just that I put food on the table—shipping is such an identity; it's such a lifestyle. So, the plan is to go back out." – ID3

Alongside money worries came identity struggles. For seafarers who had invested years into their careers, stepping away was often experienced as grief. *"In the first few months, I really missed the ship,"* ID6 reflected. ID13 summed it up: *"The biggest challenge was, I think, making the decision to walk away from seafaring because, well, I also loved it."* Without structured transition support, these questions of identity and belonging weighed heavily and increased the risk of permanent attrition.

Yet there were also examples of practices that made a difference. When companies offered meaningful shore-based or remote roles, women stayed engaged and loyal. *“My company was very supportive and gave me a remote job,”* ID5 recalled. ID10 participated in “keeping-in-touch” days to stay updated on changes. Even small gestures influenced whether women felt valued. *“They still message me, asking about the little one,”* ID6 shared. By contrast, ID11 noted the absence of recognition: *“I was not sent even a congratulatory card. Men from the crew got a birthday wish card and €200 vouchers.”*

Some companies also showed they could adapt quickly, turning lessons into policy. ID9, for example, saw new guidance introduced by email: *“When I went back on board, we received emails of how it will be if you become a mom [or] become pregnant.”* These examples suggest that with modest effort, companies can turn isolated good practices into systematic improvements.

Pain points

- **Unclear policy and communication silence:** With no proactive briefing on leave/pay, women relied on rumours or guessed their rights. (IDs 1, 2, 13)
- **Income insecurity at the exact moment costs rise:** Allowance cuts or no pay during leave, just as medical and childcare costs peak, push hurried returns. Several women described rushing back to sea before they were ready, not because they wanted to, but because they could not afford not to. (IDs 7, 10, 15)
- **No structured reintegration or career planning:** With little counselling or mapped pathways back, decisions become ad hoc. *“If the conversation had happened... I might have gone back offshore.”* (ID7)

Bright points

- **Substantive shore/remote roles that use maritime skills:** Salary continuity plus meaningful work kept talent attached (IDs 5, 8, 10, 12). *“My company was very supportive and gave me a remote job.”* (ID5)
- **Sustained human contact and peer mentoring:** Simple check-ins and women’s networks reduced isolation and second-guessing (IDs 6, 7). *“Talking to someone who’s already gone through this is huge.”* (ID7)
- **‘Keeping-in-touch’ style engagement:** Company touchpoints maintained competence and confidence during leave (ID10). *“I did two paid keeping-in-touch days to update myself.”* (ID10)
- **Organisational learning between pregnancies:** Processes improved when experience was captured and applied. *“Experience had taught them that maybe this is the way we should be doing things.”* (ID12)



Lessons for maritime leaders

Leave is where retention is won or lost. The interviews show that silence and income gaps push women away, while meaningful work, clear briefings, and small, consistent touchpoints keep them attached.

Where information is clear, pay is bridged, and meaningful work or development continues, women speak of gratitude, pride, and an intent to return. Where silence, pay docking, or token shore posts prevail, the dominant emotions are stress, injustice, and quiet resignation. *“That was it with me and the sea,”* ID13 lamented.



Stage 7 - RETURN TO WORK

This stage captures the moment when a seafarer considers re-embarkation after birth: outreach (or silence) from the company, negotiations on rotations, childcare realities, lactation logistics, and whether a credible route back to sea (or into a maritime shore role) actually exists.

Key findings

For many interviewees, the prospect of returning to sea after childbirth was a journey they had to navigate on their own. Companies often stayed silent or gave only vague responses, which were interpreted as a quiet signal that the new mothers were no longer wanted. ID7 put it bluntly: ***“If they’re not going to bring it up, then I guess that’s my answer.”*** ID8 shared the same experience: “I never heard back. It’s a bitter pill because I never quit.” In the absence of structured outreach or clear re-entry pathways, silence became an exit sign.

Even when the interviewed women wanted to return, childcare emerged as the decisive barrier. The challenge was not about capability but rather trust and logistics. Mothers spoke of trying everything from bringing a toddler on board to leaving the sea when childcare options collapsed. Without reliable support systems, even the most flexible rotations proved unworkable. Some women were able to remain in maritime through interim roles ashore, such as assistant superintendent work (ID5), regulatory positions (ID13), or home-based administrative tasks (ID8). But where companies ignored requests for job shares or shorter rotations, experienced officers drifted out of the sector altogether.

“I am not planning to go back on board. So that’s the reality of it. Although I want to do it, I cannot. I can’t leave my kid with my parents or my in-laws. My husband is also a seafarer, so I have to take responsibility for this. That’s the reason I have to go for a shore job.” – ID5

“After giving birth, it was just three months, and then I had to go back to work. Because you’re not getting any income, you don’t have the luxury of staying longer at home and bonding with the child; it becomes stressful. You’re a new mom, and your financial capacity has been crippled, so you basically have to make a choice between staying at home with the baby or going back to work. I cried so much when I left it. I was crying non-stop.” – ID15

Practical barriers also stood in the way. Lactation support was virtually absent, turning a basic health need into a daily struggle. ***“My top was soaked in milk,”*** ID10 recalled. Others noted that there was no onboard facility to store breast milk. Without private space or chilled storage, women had to choose between their infant’s health and their own dignity at work.

Financial strain made these problems worse. With pay stopping after leave, some women returned earlier than medically advised,⁸

⁸ WHO Europe recommends ≥14 weeks maternity leave (which is the EU minimum) and exclusive breastfeeding for six months. Returns <12 weeks postpartum increases health risks.

sometimes only a few months after giving birth. **“Leaving a baby at home after two months [means] you have to stop breastfeeding,”** ID12 explained. These early returns are not optimal for the health of either mother or child, cutting short recovery, bonding, and recommended breastfeeding practices.

Yet the experiences of some interviewees also showed that proactive outreach and career signals gave women the confidence to stay in maritime. For example, ID10 was called and encouraged to apply for a promotion to a chief officer role. ID9 described agency check-ins that showed interest in her career while on leave. These gestures countered the common assumption that motherhood ends career progression at sea.

Still, psychological and family strain remained largely invisible. Women described crying at night, guilt about leaving their babies, and mental fatigue, yet none had access to professional support. Without this recognition, even those who returned carried an emotional weight.

“It was quite an emotional roller coaster for me that first year away. I was four months away from her. I relied a lot on pictures that I got through Facebook or emails. I obviously called from the satellite phone, but that was very expensive. It was not easy. It was actually quite a tough journey. There was nobody to talk to if I was having an issue. I was the only female, so who am I going to be talking to about missing my few-months-old child? You have to be the strong person, almost kind of like some Wonder Woman who's got it all together, because you can't crumble.” -ID14

Pain points

- **No structured re-entry pathway:** Women must self-advocate for shore roles, job share, or phased rotations; most requests were met with silence. (IDs 2, 8, 11)
- **Income cliffs drive premature returns:** Zero or partial pay forces sailing at two to three months postpartum (ID12, 15), causing emotional distress.
- **Ship design overlooks post partum needs:** No fridges or private, safe space for lactation needs on board make returning even more challenging. (IDs 8, 10, 12)
- **Parental guilt and mental fatigue unaddressed:** Nightly tears, guilt, and isolation on first hitches back occur without counselling⁴ or fatigue risk mitigation. (ID 14, 15)

Bright points

- **Proactive outreach and advancement while on leave:** Invitations, promotions, and agency check-ins reduce attrition (IDs 9, 10).
- **Meaningful shore/remote roles that use maritime skills:** Kept careers alive during early caregiving (IDs 5, 6, 13). “Postpartum, you are completely lost. [The remote job] was a lifeline.” (ID5)



Lessons for maritime leaders

The make-or-break for retention happens after the baby is born. Capability isn't the barrier; coordination is. Where companies initiate a concrete re-entry plan (role, rotation, lactation space), women stay and progress. Where there is silence, rigidity, or no thought given to a new mother's needs, they exit, even when they want to keep sailing.

9 Tele-mental health support and routine screening are best practices during pregnancy and postpartum at sea. European perinatal guidelines recommend screening for depression/anxiety; isolation at sea is a known risk factor.

Case studies from other industries

Seafaring has its own operational realities, yet the choices around pregnancy are not unique. Other safety-critical, performance-driven sectors have already treated pregnancy as a predictable event that deserves a predictable response. Looking outside the industry helps to separate what must be maritime-specific from what can be standard practice.

This chapter features three short case studies, offering breadth of insight rather than detailed analysis. The **Royal Air Force** shows how a uniformed service with round-the-clock operations gives people and line managers a simple playbook that is easy to find and easy to use. The International Federation of Association Football's (**FIFA**) global regulations illustrate how contract and pay protections can be written into the rules for a mobile workforce so disclosure becomes safe, and planning can start early. The **Women's Tennis Association** example shows how an externally funded model can bridge income for professionals who are not in traditional employment, protecting ranking and return.

Across these examples, clear learnings emerge. First, describe clear steps in plain language for both the individual and the manager, and use a light, routine risk check that evolves as pregnancy progresses. Second, protect contract, pay, and role so the first conversation does not put income or seniority at risk. Third, plan the return in writing, including practical details such as lactation arrangements and realistic rotations. Finally, when employment is non-standard, fund the gap so income cliffs do not push people into secrecy or premature exits. Tracking a small set of measures ensures the process survives leader rotations and becomes part of routine management.

Regulatory settings and employment models differ, so details will need adaptation. The value here lies in the principles: clarity, protection, planning, and measurement. They align directly with the pain points identified in this report and can be implemented through existing maritime roles and tools without heavy bureaucracy.

Case 1 - Royal Air Force

What they did

The RAF publishes a plain-language **guide** for service personnel on managing pregnancy and maternity leave. It sets out the first steps (book a medical appointment, self-refer to a midwife, confidential notification to the line manager and career manager), provides a dedicated handbook for managers, and requires a pregnancy risk assessment that is reviewed as the term progresses. It guarantees reasonable paid time off for prenatal care (including travel and waiting time), lists points of contact (HR, medical, career manager), and explains maternity leave and pay in one place, covering both statutory and occupational entitlements.

How it correlates with the findings of this report

This directly addresses the “policy vacuum” and “person-dependent outcomes” revealed in the 15 interviews with female seafarers. The RAF’s first conversation, contacts, and forms are obvious and routine, which reduces anxiety and improvisation, much like the best-run ships in our sample.

What the maritime sector can take on board

Create a simple guide (“If you are pregnant” / “Supporting a pregnant crew member”), include a one-page risk-assessment template and a captain/manager first-response script, and make prenatal time-off and pay/leave tables easy to find in onboarding materials and workplace manuals.



Case 2 - FIFA women's football

What they did

FIFA introduced binding regulations for the protection of female players and coaches. Contracts cannot be conditioned on pregnancy tests, and termination due to pregnancy or leave is presumed to be without just cause, triggering compensation and sanctions. Pregnant players can continue to play if they wish, move to alternative duties if they feel unsafe, or take medical leave with full pay on a doctor's certificate. Minimum entitlements include 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, with at least eight weeks after birth. Adoption and family leave are also covered. Players and coaches may choose when to start their leave and must be reintegrated with a postpartum plan. Clubs must provide breastfeeding facilities and maintain full pay even if hours are reduced for breastfeeding or expressing milk. Absences for menstrual health are also explicitly protected.

How it correlates with the findings of this report

This case addresses multiple pain points from the interviews: income cliffs (minimum paid leave), blanket removals (player choice plus alternative work), and uncertain returns (flexible leave start, mandated reintegration plan, breastfeeding support). Crucially, FIFA makes disclosure safer and planning predictable by placing protections in formal regulation, not discretionary practice.

What the maritime sector can take on board

Adopt clear rules that prohibit adverse action linked to pregnancy (including a mandatory pregnancy test during pre-employment medical examinations), allow continued duties or alternative safe work with pay until leave, give employees flexibility to choose their leave start within medical cut-offs, require written reintegration plans, and provide facilities to support breastfeeding on return.



Case 3 – Women’s Tennis Association

What they did

The WTA, with external funding from the Public Investment Fund (PIF), launched the **PIF WTA Maternity Fund Program**. It is the first fully externally funded maternity programme in women’s sport, covering more than 320 eligible players. It offers up to 12 months of paid maternity leave and grants fertility treatment. The WTA’s broader Family Focus Program also provides special ranking protection for up to three years after birth (or two years after other forms of parenthood), enabling athletes to return at the same competitive level. Players also gain access to physical and mental health support from the WTA’s performance health team to support a staged return. The scheme is designed for a workforce of self-employed athletes, where traditional employer maternity cover does not exist.

How it correlates with the findings of this report

Many seafarers work on fixed-term or agency contracts without reliable income security. This model shows how an industry-backed fund can bridge income and protect career standing even when employment is non-standard, directly addressing the financial pressures that drive secrecy and premature returns.

What the maritime sector can take on board

Explore an industry-backed maternity fund or insurer-administered cover for agency/contract crews to bridge pay, pair it with rank protection on return, and provide health and mental health support for staged re-entry.



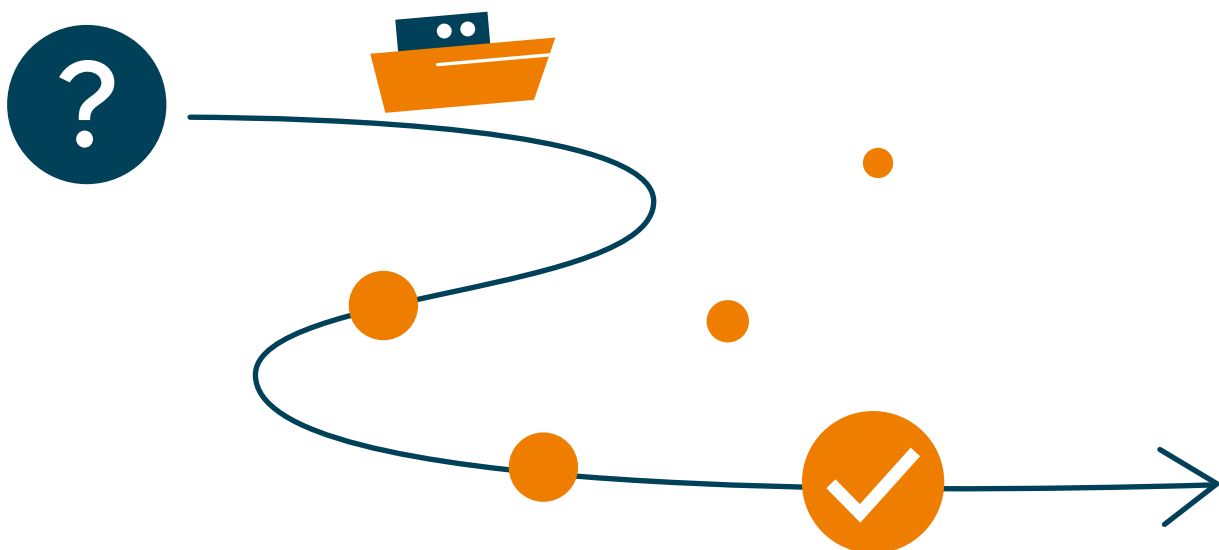
Conclusion and next steps

The challenges the 15 female seafarers described in this report were not isolated incidents but recurring patterns across nationalities, vessel types, and ranks. While supportive captains, colleagues, or managers made individual experiences more bearable, outcomes too often depended on personal goodwill rather than clear and consistent systems.

The maritime sector is often pregnancy-surprised by default rather than pregnancy-ready by design. Unclear policies leave women guessing about the next steps. Communication gaps push them into secrecy. Financial insecurity drives unsafe decisions. A lack of structured return pathways creates avoidable exits from the industry. What should be manageable life events instead become moments of anxiety, career loss, and attrition.

Yet the interviews also showed what works. Pay continuity during leave gave women the stability to recover and stay connected to the profession. Brief weekly check-ins, small send-off rituals, and simple roster adjustments created trust and belonging. Remote assignments and “keeping-in-touch” days kept women connected to their skills. Proactive outreach and clear re-entry pathways encouraged retention and even career advancement. These examples demonstrate that with modest, well-structured practices, pregnancy at sea can be navigated safely and with dignity.

The maritime sector does not need to wait for perfect solutions or large-scale reforms. Much can be done now by codifying practices already existing in some leading maritime companies. This will help ensure that a woman’s pregnancy experience does not depend on luck, goodwill, or the personality of a captain.



Next steps for maritime leaders

The interviews do not prescribe a universal policy, but they do highlight where leadership attention can deliver the most impact. Their responses have generated five key questions maritime leaders can ask themselves to move their companies and the industry forward.



Question 1:

Is pregnancy openly acknowledged and supported in our company culture?

Interviewees' experiences:

- *"Nobody is talking about being pregnant on board. We have lots of toolbox talks about safety, lots of drills, emergency audits, but pregnancy is a taboo topic." – ID4*
- *"I was not sent even a congratulatory card. Men from the crew got a birthday wish card and €200 vouchers." – ID11*



What they said would help: Visible acknowledgement that pregnancy is a normal part of life at sea; symbolic gestures or small recognitions that show women are valued equally.



Question 2:

Do our crews know, today, what to do if they or a colleague becomes pregnant?

Interviewees' experiences:

- *"I looked into the SMS [Safety Management System, ed.] and there was nothing about pregnancy. After 24 weeks, you maybe have to tell them? Nobody knows." – ID3*
- *"There was no information; there was never a mention about it. No regulation or even, you know, simply to whom I should inform." – ID6*



What they said would help: Early briefing on pregnancy rights and onboard medical supplies, and clear guidance on what to do and who to contact.



Question 3:

When a crew member first suspects they are pregnant, can they confirm it and get advice without risk or delay?

Interviewees' experiences:

- *"There was no pregnancy test on board, and we couldn't get off the vessel because of COVID. When I finally saw a doctor, I was already past the first trimester." - ID7*
- *"You have to log it if you use the ship's test. That alone puts people off." - ID8*
- *"If I had to ask permission for a pregnancy test, I wouldn't have asked." - ID7*



What they said would help: Discreet self-tests in the medical chest; a confidential hotline or checklist for next steps.



Question 4:

After they disclose, does support rely on individual goodwill, or on a process everyone can trust?

Interviewees' experiences:

- *"[The captain] was super excited and said, 'What do you need? Do you need to change your watch?'" - ID3*
- *"Nobody asked me what I need. They just booked the flight." - ID1*
- *"I never heard back. I wasn't even sure they'd accepted my notice." - ID8*



What they said would help: Clear written pathways (risk assessment, duties, pay); guaranteed confidentiality until the seafarer is ready to disclose; proactive options for shore-side or lighter-duty work.



Question 5:

Is there a credible, supported route back to sea that involves the seafarer's wishes?

Interviewees' experiences:

- *"Now I am at home and planning to go on board again. I really hope I can get a shorter contract. But the standard leave is three months; requests for longer maternity leave are usually declined. If we do not want to leave our babies that long, most of us just stop working." – ID2*
- *"Leaving a baby at home after two months... you have to stop breastfeeding." – ID12*
- *"I want to sail my chief mate's license; I want to get my master's license. My hope is to find shorter contracts to see how it works for my family unit." – ID3*



What they said would help: Pay continuity during leave; guaranteed seat/rank protection; options for shorter rotations and job-share; defined re-entry steps (medical sign-off, refresher/keeping-in-touch days, lactation facilities); a named contact who co-plans timing so the seafarer has real agency in the decision.

A collective call to action

A willingness to improve pregnancy at sea is already visible in the actions of individual captains, crewing managers, and peers who adapted duties, held seats open, or simply offered empathy. What is missing is a shared framework that turns these ad hoc actions into consistent, reliable practice.

For the maritime industry, this is more than a matter of fairness; it is a value proposition. Talent is scarce, avoidable attrition is expensive, and expectations around human sustainability are rising. Supporting women through pregnancy and early parenthood is an opportunity for the sector to define good, better, and best practices that strengthen retention, attract new talent, and safeguard operational safety. By working together now, the maritime community can transform pregnancy from a point of career exit into a normal, well-managed part of working life at sea. In doing so, it would send a clear signal that this is a sector where building a family and building a career are actively supported.

Appendix:

method at a glance

This report draws on 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with pregnant women who worked at sea between 2008 and 2024. Interviewees included ranks from cadet to master and experience across multiple vessel segments (e.g., tankers, bulk and container, offshore supply, dredgers, ferries, cruise).

Research design

Interviews were conducted by video or phone (typically 60–90 minutes). A question-led guide was used to elicit full narratives (see the question set below). During analysis, responses were organised into seven stages (**Prior, Discovery, Disclosure, Working while pregnant, Repatriation, Leave, Return**), allowing cross-case comparison without constraining interviewees during data collection.

Interview guide

1. Can you tell me a bit about your background and your journey as a seafarer?
2. Have you ever experienced becoming a parent or navigating pregnancy while working at sea?
3. What do you remember about that time – how things unfolded and how it felt?
4. Who were the people you talked to first – onboard or ashore – when you found out?
5. Did you feel supported in any way – practically, emotionally, or otherwise?
6. How did you find the whole process? Was it clear what to do? Were there any parts of the process that felt unclear or difficult to navigate?
7. Who were the key people involved in how things were handled? (e.g., captain, crewing manager, HR, doctor, union, peers)
8. What role did they play, and how did their actions affect your experience?
9. Were there moments that felt especially challenging or uncertain for you?
10. Was there anything that made you feel particularly seen, safe, or supported?
11. Did you take any leave? What was that experience like for you?
12. How was the transition back to work after becoming a parent?
13. What work position would be ideal for you when returning to work after giving birth?
14. Looking back, what do you wish had been in place to support you better?
15. If you could change one thing for future seafarers who become parents, what would it be?
16. Is there anything you think companies might not understand about this experience?
17. Anything else you'd like to share that we haven't asked?

Sampling and recruitment

Participation was voluntary and self-selecting. Invitations were shared via women-in-shipping networks and LinkedIn. Any seafarer who experienced pregnancy while serving at sea was eligible. The final group spanned eight nationalities, ranks from cadet to master, and experience across multiple vessel segments.

Data handling and ethics

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded thematically. Participants gave verbal informed consent, could withdraw at any time, and are quoted anonymously (citations by ID, e.g., ID7). Data were stored in accordance with Europe's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requirements.

Limitations and validity

As with most qualitative work, self-selection may over-represent participants with stronger views. Findings are intended to illuminate patterns and mechanisms, not statistical prevalence.

The strength of this evidence lies in its consistency across contexts. The same gaps appeared across eight nationalities, six vessel types, and ranks from cadet to master. After roughly a dozen interviews, no new themes emerged, only new examples. In qualitative research, this indicates thematic saturation (additional cases add repetition rather than novelty).

A large-sample employability survey by Global Maritime Forum with maritime recruitment platform TURTLE (n=3,319 participants; multi-national, multi-rank; 94.9% men, 4.9% women) shows broad support for family policies: 78.8% of men and 74.1% of women rated maternity/paternity packages as important or very important. This quantitative signal reinforces our emphasis on pay continuity and return-to-work design.

The combined demographic and methodology view sets the empirical foundation for this report, where the lived experience of these 15 women shows why clear pregnancy policies are both a safety imperative and a talent retention opportunity.



The current pregnancy at sea journey

About the current journey – This describes the most common patterns revealed in the interviews with 15 women who have experienced pregnancy at sea. Some cases are simpler or better supported; others are more fragmented or severe.

STAGE	How seafarers experience it (now)	Pain points and bright spots
1. Prior 	- I can't find a clear note on pregnancy or my rights in the safety management system (SMS) or handbook. - I wasn't briefed on pregnancy in induction. - I'm unsure who to contact without starting a chain of paperwork. - My trust in the captain varies; I'm not sure it's safe to ask.	Pain points: Policy silence; uneven leadership trust; entry/pipeline bias. Bright spots: Informal flexibility from some masters; shorter/coastal rotations that make access to care easier; peer/partner support.
2. Discovery 	- I can't discreetly access a test on board. - I delay confirmation until shore or ask union/peers what to do. - I worry questions will risk my contract or trigger gossip. - Patchy internet makes it hard to check symptoms or plan care.	Pain points: No assured, private test route; fear of paperwork/gossip; income risk. Bright spots: Union/women's groups giving rapid rights guidance; pragmatic medical sign-offs; good internet, where available.
3. Disclosure 	- I don't know how the master or crew will react. - I fear being removed or losing pay once I speak up. - Privacy isn't guaranteed, so I choose my moment carefully.	Pain points: No response script or checklist; income cliff on sign-off; blanket/insurer-driven decisions. Bright spots: Empathetic captains; explicit seat-back guarantees; two-way planning of relief.
4. Working while pregnant 	- I keep working but manage risk informally; there's no standard path of action. - Adjustments depend on who is in command; support can change with rotations. - I may conceal the pregnancy to protect my income. - I feel isolated and unsure what is "allowed."	Pain points: No simple risk assessment template; limited connectivity; wage loss. Bright spots: Light weekly risk reviews; adding an extra officer; timely fit-for-duty notes; reliable connectivity; supportive crews.
5. Repatriation 	- I'm not sure which week I'm expected to sign off; decisions can be abrupt. - I am scared to lose my income. - Travel happens, but no one clearly explains pay, benefits, or next steps.	Pain points: Blanket policies; no "exit kit" (benefits/next steps); pay reductions and total loss of income Bright spots: Early, personalised cut-offs; respectful send-off tone; pre-arranged bridge assignments.
6. Leave 	- I don't have a simple brief on pay, benefits, and timelines. - Contact is sporadic; I'm rarely offered optional tasks or an interim shore position to stay connected. - I miss the ship and worry about losing my skills or licence.	Pain points: Policy opacity; income gaps; no reintegration planning. Bright spots: Remote/shore roles that keep skills alive; simple human check-ins; capturing learning across pregnancies.
7. Return to work 	- I have to chase the company; silence feels like a "no." - There's no written path back or rotation options that fit childcare. - Lactation arrangements aren't set before I arrive. - I feel pressure to return early for financial reasons	Pain points: No structured re-entry pathway; limited lactation facilities; little rotation flexibility; income pressure; childcare gaps. Bright spots: Proactive outreach; job-share/shorter deployments where possible; practical lactation solutions.

The better pregnancy at sea journey

About the better journey – This describes a target, not a script. Circumstances vary by vessel, contract, health, and jurisdiction; the aim is to apply consistent principles with judgment.

STAGE	How seafarers say it should feel	Priority gap to close
1. Prior 	- The topic was covered in safety briefings, so I'm not the first to raise it. - I can easily find a plain language note that explains my rights at every stage. - I know who to call without worrying I'll trigger a bureaucratic chain reaction.	Missing visibility of policy and contacts. Add a 1-pager "If you become pregnant," SMS chapter, and named contact.
2. Discovery 	- A discreet test is available on board. - If I need a scan, the company helps me book one at the next safe port. - I can ask questions without risking my contract.	No discreet path for first steps. Add test access and a confidential first conversation channel.
3. Disclosure 	- I know I can disclose my pregnancy when I am ready to do so because the process is clear and standardised. - When I speak up, the first response is support, not doubt or panic. - I hear: "Let's make a work plan together." - My wages and promotion path are not instantly at risk.	Person-dependent reactions. Add a response script, privacy protocol, and explicit seat-back/role guarantee.
4. Working while pregnant 	- My job is adjusted through a simple risk check, not by removing me from the roster overnight. - The crew knows how to help without sidelining me. - Basic needs are met with minimal fuss.	Lack of routine assessment. Use a one-page weekly risk assessment and adjust tasks where needed.
5. Repatriation 	- Sign off is planned. - I'm briefed on pay and benefits before I pack my bags. - The departure feels respectful.	Late, transactional repatriations. Set personalised cut-offs early, brief on pay/benefits, and pre-arrange possible shore/remote work.
6. Leave 	- Pay continues long enough to recover and bond with my child. - My licence and seniority are safeguarded; I can do optional shore tasks to maintain my skills. - I can speak to someone (peer or counsellor) about my new parenthood.	Unclear entitlements and silence. Issue a leave brief, schedule check-ins, offer optional remote tasks, and support.
7. Return to work 	- Before sailing again, someone checks physical, mental, and childcare readiness, not just my medical fitness certificate. - Flexible options exist: shorter assignments, job share, temporary shore posting near home. - Facilities (freezer/fridge, quiet room with privacy) are in place before I arrive.	No re-entry pathway. Agree on a written return plan that covers rotation options and lactation logistics.



About the All Aboard Alliance

The All Aboard Alliance aims to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in the maritime industry. Its member companies are committed to improving standards and shaping a sustainable, innovative, and forward-looking sector. Through collaboration and collective action, the Alliance is committed to ensuring that all current and future employees are treated with dignity and respect, helping the industry attract diverse talent and strengthen its ability to navigate the transformations of decarbonisation, digitalisation, and automation.



About the Global Maritime Forum

The Global Maritime Forum is an international not-for profit organisation committed to shaping the future of global seaborne trade. It works by bringing together visionary leaders and experts who, through collaboration and collective action, strive to increase sustainable long-term economic development and human well-being. Established in 2017, the Global Maritime Forum is funded through a combination of grants and partner contributions. It operates independently of any outside influence and does not support individual technologies or companies.

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