Diversifying Maritime Leadership

Authors

PhD Zoë Ogahara
Project Manager, Human Sustainability, Global Maritime Forum

Christian Andersen
Project Manager, Human Sustainability, Global Maritime Forum

PhD Susanne Justesen
Director, Human Sustainability, Global Maritime Forum

Contributors

Harpa Hrönn Stefánsdóttir
Project Manager, Human Sustainability, Global Maritime Forum

All Aboard Alliance member companies

Editor

Justin Cremer
Senior Communications Manager, Editor, Global Maritime Forum

Disclaimer

Table of Contents

Executive summary

Diversifying maritime leadership is not only essential for fairness and representation, it is also a proven driver of stronger business outcomes. In a sector facing a projected shortage of 90,000 trained officers by 2026, enabling leadership diversity is critical to building resilience and ensuring the industry's long-term competitiveness.

As part of this effort, the Global Maritime Forum, along with All Aboard Alliance member companies, conducted 108 in-depth interviews with a wide range of leaders working both at sea and on shore. Many of the stories highlighted the positive experiences of maritime leaders who have successfully upskilled, advanced in their careers, and found meaning and satisfaction in their roles. These stories provide valuable insights into what enables talent to thrive in maritime leadership.

However, the interviews also revealed persistent, everyday practices rooted in outdated social and business norms that waste skills and limit progress. Some examples included an expert female engineer who was asked to take notes instead of contributing her technical expertise, an African cadet assigned mostly cleaning duties instead of receiving meaningful training, young parents who left the industry after seeing no viable path to continue their careers, and transgender seafarers who fear for their safety. These cases, though varied, share a common thread: they squander human potential and cost companies valuable talent.

An analysis of the responses identified three overarching areas where barriers to diversifying maritime leadership persist:

- societal norms and expectations that influence career opportunities and perceptions of leadership;

- company policies and culture that unintentionally hinder progression for underrepresented groups; and

- professional relationships that can either empower or marginalise competent leaders.

Six key specific barriers were identified within these areas. At the same time, three critical "bridges" were also identified—enabling factors that support leaders of all backgrounds in advancing based on their capabilities and aspirations.

This report outlines these leadership barriers and bridges in detail, offering insights for maritime organisations and leaders seeking to unlock untapped talent, close leadership gaps, and build a stronger, more resilient industry for the future.

1. Introduction

Responsible for transporting around 90% of the world's goods, the maritime industry operates across international, intercultural, and interorganisational lines, engaging with highly diverse demographics. Yet, leadership teams across the sector are often more homogenous than the diverse organisations they lead and the global markets they serve.

Numerous studies confirm that organisations with greater gender and ethnic diversity on their boards and executive teams consistently pursue broader growth ambitions, deliver greater social and environmental impact, and cultivate more engaged, satisfied workforces.[1]

This need for inclusive leadership is particularly urgent in the maritime industry, which faces a critical talent shortage, with an estimated 90,000 additional officers needed by 2026 to continue normal business operations.[2] Beyond the challenge of filling positions, this situation highlights an urgent need to rethink how the industry attracts, develops, and retains skilled leaders. By developing and improving inclusive leadership pipelines, maritime organisations can access a wider talent pool and strengthen their resilience in a highly competitive global market.

Together with All Aboard Alliance member companies, the Global Maritime Forum set out to examine barriers to enabling diverse leadership teams and explore how the experiences of current leaders can guide companies in building more diverse and inclusive teams for the future.

The All Aboard Alliance and the Global Maritime Forum would like to thank the industry leaders in the Diversifying Maritime Leadership committee for their guidance and the many contributors who collaborated to co-design the interview guide and provided input along the way.

- **Beng Cristobal, Philippine Transmarine Carriers**
- **Eman Abdalla, Cargill Ocean Transportation**
- **Eva Rodriguez, Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement**
- **Gerardo Borromeo, Philippine Transmarine Carriers**
- **Heidi Heseltine, Diversity Study Group**
- **Isabelle Rickmers, Turtle**
- **John Hadjipateras, Dorian LPG**
- **Kathryn Upson, bp shipping**
- **Laure Baratgin, Rio Tinto**
- **Lucie-Marie Guathier, Fednav**
- **Martha Roed, G2 Ocean**
- **Mikael Skov, Hafnia**
- **Nicholas Brown, Bureau Veritas**
- **Noriko Hiyamizu, Mitsui O.S.K. Lines**
- **Patrizia Kern, Swiss Re Corporate Solutions**
- **Philippa Charlton, Lloyd's Register**
- **Purnima Singh, RightShip**
- **Rajesh Unni, Synergy Marine Group**
- **Renia Chrysikopoulou, GasLog**
- **Tatsuro Watanabe, Mitsui O.S.K. Lines**

1   McKinsey & Company. (2023). *Diversity matters even more: The case for holistic impact.*
2   BIMCO & International Chamber of Shipping. (2021). *Seafarer workforce report: The global supply and demand for seafarers in 2021* (2021 ed.). Witherbys.

To ground this exploration in lived experience, 108 maritime leaders representing a range of personal and professional backgrounds were interviewed. These interviews offered various perspectives on career progression, access to opportunity, and the everyday realities of entering and navigating leadership in the maritime sector. Rather than focusing on company policies, this report aims to understand real-world experiences that can help shape more informed and effective strategies for diversifying leadership across the industry.

Many of the challenges raised by interviewees echo patterns seen well beyond maritime. While they are not unique to this sector, their impact is shaped by the specific composition and conditions of the industry, where structural change is often slower and environments may not yet reflect the diversity of those entering or aspiring to lead. They point to a broader need to make maritime careers more attractive and equitable, both for new talent and those already navigating its career pathways. With the technological leaps of the past 25 years, the complexity of organisations, industries, and the people within them has never been greater. The maritime industry has always been global, but today the diversity across roles, companies, and countries is more visible and vital than ever.

This report explores leaders' career journeys in the maritime industry, offering insights into their experiences and progression. The first part looks at the broader societal factors that make it difficult to diversify maritime leadership, and how well the industry is positioned to respond to change. The next section focuses on how those challenges appear in company policies and culture. The final part turns to how colleagues and workplace communities experience these challenges. Throughout the report, current maritime leaders share the factors that helped them advance in their careers.

2. Findings

Most of the leaders interviewed shared numerous positive experiences within the maritime industry. Even during challenging periods, they expressed a deep appreciation for various aspects of their work, ranging from opportunities to collaborate globally with diverse teams to tackling complex engineering challenges and solving demanding yet rewarding problems. At the same time, they highlighted several sources of unnecessary stress that detract from both the quality of work and the effectiveness of leadership.

When asked, *"Have you ever faced any particular barriers that you believe were related to your gender, race, ethnicity or any other aspect of your identity while in a leadership role within the maritime industry?"*, 68% of women responded yes, as opposed to 33% of men.
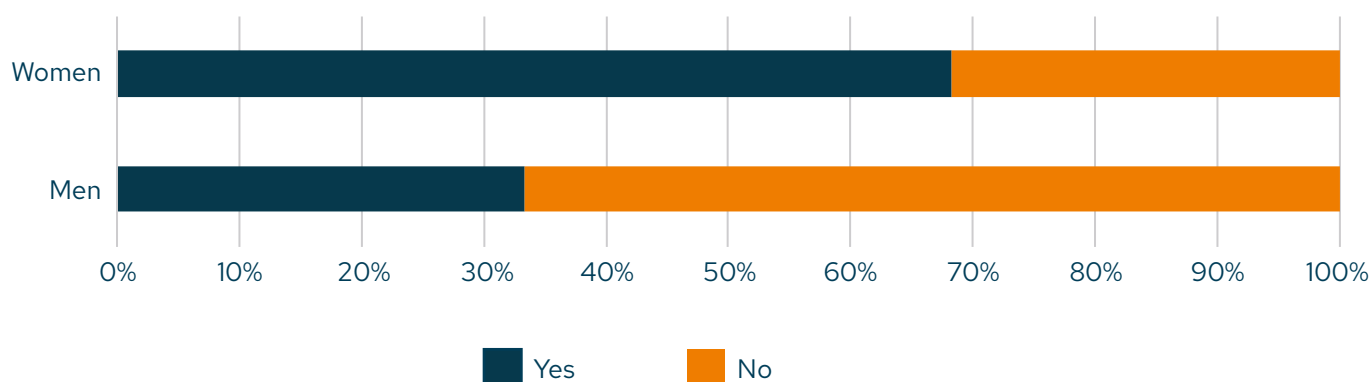

Figure 1: *"Have you ever faced any particular barriers that you believe were related to your gender, race, ethnicity or any other aspect of your identity while in a leadership role within the maritime industry?", by gender*
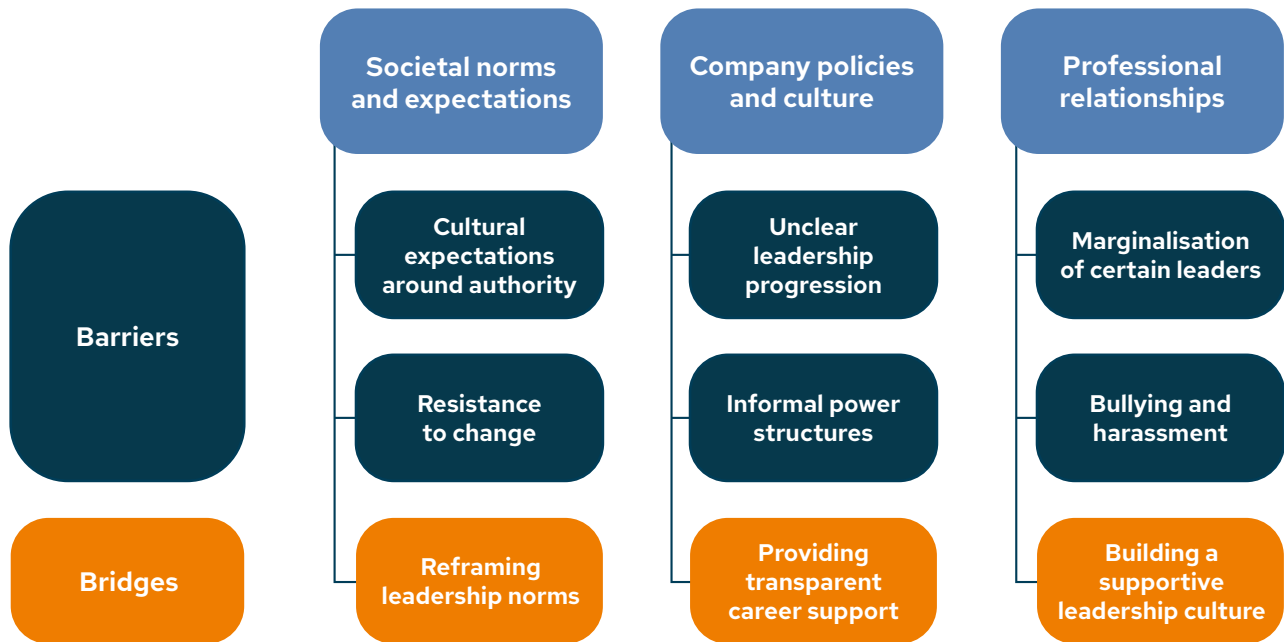
Respondents shared numerous examples of unequal treatment based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, socio-economic background, transgender identity, age, and social status. Importantly, many individuals reported experiencing prejudice linked to multiple factors simultaneously.

When faced with perceived unfair treatment, some leaders opted to move to companies where they felt they would be treated more fairly. These moves were often not for strategic career advancement, but simply to avoid discrimination. Others described feeling discouraged, struggling with mental health, and many knew leaders who left the maritime industry altogether.

When asked to respond on a scale of one to five (with one meaning not at all and five meaning completely) to the question, *"Can you bring your authentic self to work?"*, most respondents selected five (41%) or four (37%), which indicates that the majority of leaders feel safe and supported at work. However, 15 intervieewes (14%) their experience at three or below. Notably, seven of these were LGBTQ+. With only a total of 11 LGBTQ+ individuals interviewed, this suggests a significant disparity in the experience of feeling able to be themselves in the workplace for LGBTQ+ leaders.

Findings

The interviews revealed three overarching categories of barriers to diversifying maritime leadership: societal norms and expectations, company policies and culture, and professional relationships. Within each category, the research identified two barriers and one "bridge", an enabling factor that helps talent from all backgrounds to thrive and advance.

	Societal norms and expectations	Company policies and culture	Professional relationships
Barriers	Cultural expectations around authority	Unclear leadership progression	Marginalisation of certain leaders
	Resistance to change	Informal power structures	Bullying and harassment
Bridges	Reframing leadership norms	Providing transparent career support	Building a supportive leadership culture

2.1   Societal norms and expectations

Some of the most pertinent challenges to diversifying maritime leadership that emerged from the interviews relate to systemic barriers rooted in broader societal structures. Throughout the interviews, expectations based on stereotypes and gender biases were frequently mentioned as persistent issues. These issues are often amplified within the maritime sector, a traditionally male-dominated industry. The prevailing culture in such environments may reinforce outdated perceptions, making it more difficult for women and other underrepresented groups to advance or feel fully accepted in their roles.

This section explores stereotypes within the maritime sector identified by many interviewees, along with some of the impacts these have on individuals. These barriers appear cultural and deeply rooted, making them difficult to challenge or change. However, there are also signs of progress. Although change is uneven, the evolving landscape described by maritime leaders offers hope that the industry's culture can shift over time. Despite some resistance to diversity initiatives in wider society, many maritime organisations recognise the value of diverse and inclusive leadership and are actively working to support it.

Cultural expectations around authority

Stereotypes of leadership

Several interviewed leaders highlighted persistent stereotypes in the maritime industry, particularly the association of leadership with masculine and Caucasian traits. Many top positions in maritime organisations are still held by white men. Individuals who do not fit this mould are often overlooked for leadership roles or struggle to be recognised as leaders, even when occupying such positions. One leader described negotiating with a shipyard for new builds, explaining that counterparts "expected me to look a certain way. When I arrived, they questioned whether I had the authority to sign, despite it being my company. They would even tell the brokers they weren't sure about me" (Asian C-Suite Leader).

This example illustrates how having a leadership title does not necessarily translate into being treated or perceived as a leader.

Some respondents revealed how stereotypes around gender and nationality had affected their career trajectories. One common assumption is that women have caregiving responsibilities and are therefore unavailable or less committed to their careers. As a result, they are at times not offered the same opportunities as men. As one interviewee described it, "I have had a master explain to me that females are a non-profitable investment to the industry due to getting through all licenses and then just wanting babies and coming ashore" (European Mid-Level Leader). This stereotype falsely assumes that men will not take on caregiving responsibilities. As one interviewee explained, "It is seen as normal if a mother leaves early to get the kids or has a non-working day, but for men it is less acceptable to take these steps. I see this changing as fathers in my generation increasingly take time for their kids" (European Entry-Level Leader).

> " Senior management told me they had considered me for an important role but assumed I wouldn't be interested due to having young children. They didn't mention anything until the position had been filled. After this experience, I lost interest in growing with the company and resigned. "
>
> (European Entry-Level Leader)

> " To fit in with international best standards they typically have an expat in positions of captain and chief. They want to look the part. There are perfectly capable Africans, but if you are black you are not going to be up to par, it is an unwritten rule.
>
> (African Mid-Level Leader)

It is also apparent from the interviews that expectations also differ in relation to nationalities and ethnicities. As one interviewee explained, "One of the issues I have seen within the maritime industry is that resources from areas where labour is cheaper are somehow seen as 'less worthy'. It is common to see discriminatory attitudes from leaders towards these ethnic groups and sub-par treatment of these resources because they are deemed to be 'cheap' and ergo assumed to not be good enough" (European C-Suite Leader).

Mental burden and invisible workload

Leaders described the additional psychological and emotional burden of acting 'against the grain'. These struggles take time, energy, and focus away from the actual work of leadership, creating an additional, invisible workload for those who do not conform to the dominant norms. As one interviewee explained, "It grates on you, because every day is a fight—every day you are trying to say, yes, I deserve to sit at this table. After a while, you get tired" (African Mid-Level Leader).

Many leaders felt they had to overperform in order to be taken seriously, while also being judged more harshly for mistakes. One woman shared:

> " I've worked in and around the shipping industry for my whole career. It's an exciting industry with lots of opportunity. Everywhere I've worked has been male-dominated, and as a woman, I've had to prove myself 110%, day in and day out, just to be taken seriously. Especially when starting out in office-based roles, you have to think about what you wear, who you talk to, how you behave—you can be judged and written off very quickly. And even then, you might be judged for being too serious, too ambitious, too boring. It's hard to win.
>
> (European Senior-Level Leader)

Another recurring theme was the fear of speaking up and the emotional toll of having to self-advocate more frequently. One respondent explained, "It feels like, to progress, you have to tolerate uncomfortable situations. Men in shipping don't want women who make a fuss" (European Entry-Level Leader). Many described learning to endure mistreatment rather than risk their careers by reporting it. "Over the years, I have listened to many derogatory conversations about women—often as the only woman in teams of men—which meant I kept my head down, didn't complain, accepted this as part of my working conditions, and tried to navigate it on my own as best I could," one European Senior-Level Leader said. Another highlighted the additional effort required simply to succeed: "I've had to learn the regulations better so I can advocate for myself" (North American Senior-Level Leader).

The additional mental burden is further evidenced by an analysis of what respondents identified as their biggest challenges. Responses that focused on gaining access to, or being accepted in, leadership roles were predominantly given by female leaders. In contrast, responses that focused on the responsibilities and demands of the role itself were more evenly distributed across genders.
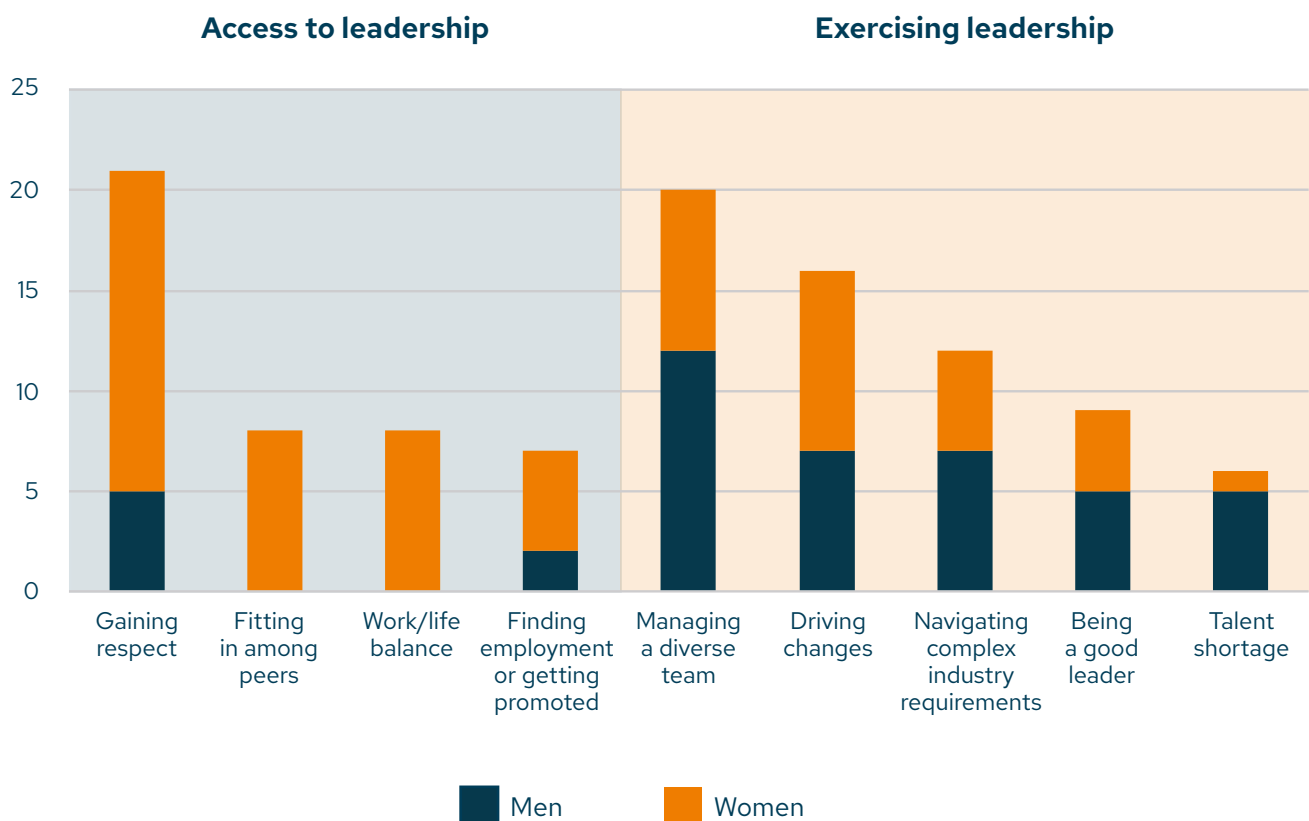

Figure 4: *"As a leader in maritime, what has been your biggest challenge?" by leadership challenge and gender*

Resistance to change

Path dependence

The maritime industry has traditionally been male-dominated, with many major shipping companies led primarily by white men. Several interviewees noted resistance within parts of the industry to diversifying leadership or embracing the changes needed to support it.

As one leader shared, "It's not so evident in formal meetings, but in informal gatherings, people are quite vocal about their discomfort with women being treated as equals or more. Extended maternity leave, returning after a career break, women sailing and rising through the ranks—some men still question these. This attitude isn't universal, but it remains present in certain pockets" (Asian Mid-Level Leader).

While such views are not formal policy, they influence workplace behaviour and attitudes toward women leaders. Many noted that, due to the industry's history, colleagues and management may have limited experience working with women, particularly in senior roles. One participant explained, "People are a product of the system. Maritime employs far more men than women, and many come from backgrounds where women aren't seen as equals or don't work in this field at all" (European Senior-Level Leader).

Cultural diversity and the opportunity to work with people from around the world are widely seen as strengths and attractive features of the maritime industry. However, this diversity also brings difficulties, particularly when it comes to challenging and shifting entrenched norms and practices.

Many maritime roles involve working with rotating teams and constantly working with different clients. This dynamic can make it difficult for leaders to establish trust and credibility, as they must repeatedly reintroduce and reassert themselves. In some cases, organisations are hesitant to confront clients or external partners who are unwilling to engage with leaders from non-majority backgrounds. As one leader noted, their experience of discrimination stemmed from "our organisation's strong focus on maintaining client satisfaction above all else" (Asian Senior-Level Leader).

Fear of exclusion

Some leaders observed that the white male-dominated nature of the maritime industry can make it unappealing to potential leaders from underrepresented groups. As one interviewee explained, "I know many female friends who were interested in the maritime sector but never pursued careers in it due to fear of discrimination" (South American Entry-Level Leader). It is also noted that fewer women currently undertake STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects than men, although this trend is rapidly changing. Nevertheless, the absence of a strong pipeline for diverse talent limits opportunities for diversifying maritime leadership.

> I cannot imagine what it might be like to be a gay man on board, say, a Filipino vessel. With this hyper masculinity, even if one of these individuals was gay, I could not perceive of this person coming out.
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Another interviewee talked about how the maritime industry's perceived hostility towards underrepresented groups causes some people to hide their identity. "We have homosexual people in our fleet today who will never come out, particularly gay men. It is not a welcoming environment" (European Mid-Level Leader).

Reframing leadership norms

Maritime organisations and leaders have significant opportunities to define and continuously redefine effective leadership. This includes challenging long-standing norms and embracing a broader understanding of leadership qualities. Organisations can foster this inclusive approach to leadership by openly discussing different leadership qualities and providing opportunities to further develop and strengthen them. The interviewed leaders gave numerous examples of how drawing upon their unique perspectives allowed them to exceed expectations and deliver excellent results.

As one leader shared, "I often felt that being different from the norm has helped me advance in certain ways. I am convinced that a lot of queer people have learned to be very empathetic, put themselves in other people's shoes and understand social dynamics. They can be quite inclusive leaders because they know what it is like" (European Mid-Level Leader). In the example below, a transgender leader reflected upon how different gender expectations affected their leadership style. These examples highlight how nontraditional approaches to leadership can be highly effective and contribute positively within a maritime context.
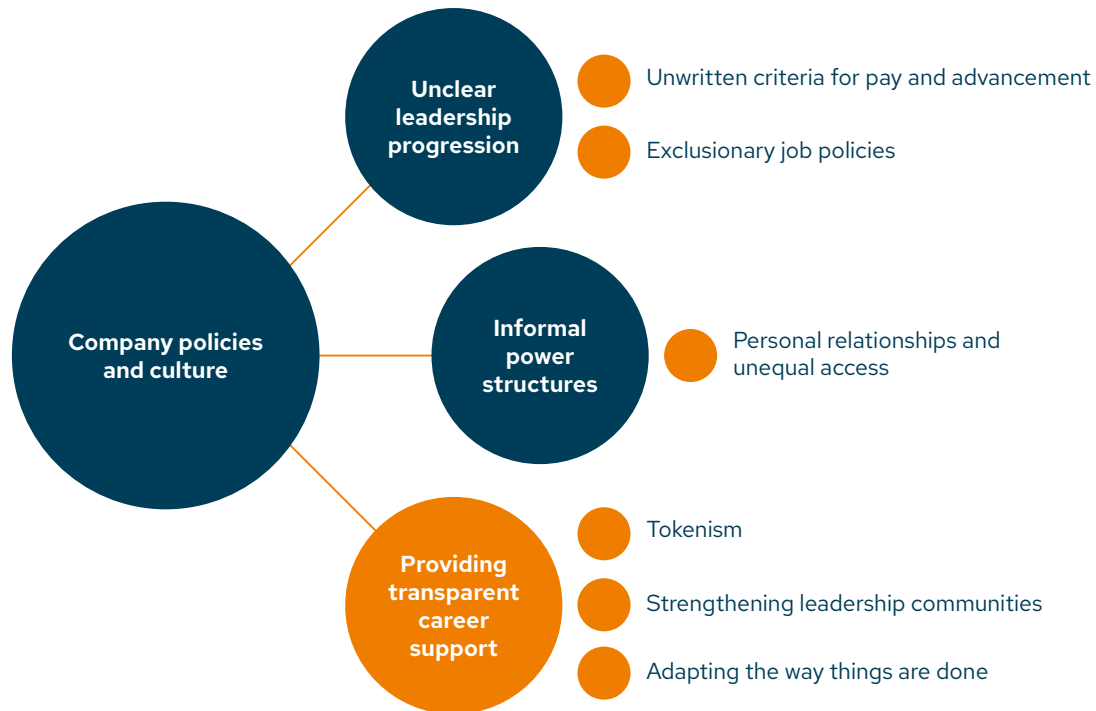
> " Being transgender, I am one of the few people who worked as chiefly male-presenting and now work as female. There is a stark difference. I had to change my leadership style when I transitioned. There are certain behaviours that are expected of men that women aren't expected to do. Men are expected to be aggressive; otherwise, they will be walked all over. So, I had to learn to do that, and then not do that. I have to write more letters of warning now, which has also caused more positive change. If a guy writes a letter of warning, it's a prelude to firing someone. If I write one, it usually leads to changing their behaviour. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Acknowledging the contributions of leaders with diverse approaches may require reviewing appraisal systems and evaluation processes. Many interviewees highlighted the importance of feeling valued and acknowledged, whether by management and peers, receiving awards and promotions, or simply receiving constructive feedback. As one noted, "Sometimes, when you handle candidates' applications, implement new procedures, or simply share information, getting feedback from people and seeing that it was successful is great. Leadership is about communication. It's all about getting the feedback that the people appreciate what was done" (South American Senior-Level Leader).

Visibility also plays a crucial role in reshaping perceptions. Promoting the visibility of leaders with diverse backgrounds and styles helps challenge traditional stereotypes, enabling recognition, and inspiring future role models. Several interviewees spoke about the impact of representation. One noted, "For me, having female role models has been important. It's encouraging to see women succeed; success stories show that it is possible" (European Entry-Level Leader). Another added, "Knowing that someone else has done it means you don't need to carry so much baggage. Just knowing it's possible makes a difference" (North American Senior-Level Leader).

2.2   Company policies and culture

Company policies and culture

Unclear leadership progression
- Unwritten criteria for pay and advancement
- Exclusionary job policies

Informal power structures
- Personal relationships and unequal access

Providing transparent career support
- Tokenism
- Strengthening leadership communities
- Adapting the way things are done

While cultural change is essential, leaders also identified barriers that are embedded in company policies and culture. Several respondents highlighted company rules they felt excluded them from opportunities for reasons beyond their control and unrelated to their capabilities as leaders.

These barriers manifest in subtle but impactful ways, such as being passed over for assignments or promotions based on assumptions about aspirations or personal circumstances. Inflexible policies and exclusion from informal but influential social networks, sometimes due to gender, religious commitments, or caregiving responsibilities, can further limit career progression.

The leaders interviewed often emphasised that they do not want special treatment. Rather, they want to be assessed fairly and given equitable opportunities to succeed. There is shared concern across minority and non-minority groups about poorly implemented diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts that may feel tokenistic. Improving hiring and promotion practices was a key recommendation from leaders who had advanced in their careers due to their own access to good opportunities. Building fair, transparent, and inclusive systems is vital for recognising new leadership talent and for diversifying maritime leadership.

Unclear leadership progression

Unwritten criteria for pay and advancement

Respondents frequently reported that evaluations related to hiring, promotions, and compensation lack transparency and, in many cases, appear biased. A significant number of female leaders indicated that they are being paid less than their male counterparts. One interviewee explained, "I'm visibly queer, and I discovered that two of my black female coworkers and I were all underpaid compared to colleagues in the same role. The company just told me I wasn't supposed to know how my wages compared to anyone else's" (North American Entry-Level Leader).

> " It is crucial that we address the different standards applied to diverse groups in terms of salaries, opportunities, and benefits, while maintaining consistent expectations for work responsibilities, performance, and outcomes. "
>
> (Asian Mid-Level Leader)

In some cases, these discrepancies appear deliberate. Another respondent described, "I was advised that the offered salary was 'good enough' for me as a woman" (Asian Mid-Level Leader). Such incidents were described as eroding trust between leaders and their organisations, creating a perception that companies do not fully value or support their contributions.

Concerns were also raised about biases in hiring processes that can manifest subtly during recruitment and selection. One leader observed, "I am often the only woman on the panel, and I have seen it. I've watched them open interview processes for women and people from other backgrounds and it's almost like there is a seed of doubt at the beginning that is not there when they are interviewing someone who went to their school or shares their background. You can see it's not intentional, but you can see it" (North American Senior-Level Leader).

Exclusionary job policies

Many maritime companies operate in ways that make it difficult for leaders from non-majority backgrounds to thrive, particularly when their personal circumstances change. Balancing family life with demanding and often irregular working hours was frequently cited as a major challenge. A mother of two reflected, "I face personal difficulties that can limit my professional development and my role in the organisation. For example, I'm not invited to offsite events very often, and I cannot travel as frequently" (European Mid-Level Leader).

> If we can consider how we organise our jobs, they can be adapted to offer more flexibility.
>
> (European C-Suite Leader)

Underdeveloped parental leave policies were also identified as a significant barrier to career advancement. As one leader shared, "After my first maternity leave, I had to struggle to get my job back, despite it being clear legally what the situation was. I was not supported at all, and this was a big obstacle for me to overcome in terms of my confidence" (European Senior-Level Leader).

Another barrier to leadership progression relates to unequal access to resources for upskilling. In some companies, financial support for training and professional development is only provided to certain nationalities, limiting opportunities for others. As one interviewee explained, "Upskilling is not the same for different nationalities. European nationalities in certain companies get paid to upskill while the rest have to fend for themselves. It should be more equal. If an individual cannot progress with a solid education, there is no hope of advancing" (Asian Mid-Level Leader).

Interviewees also described strict restrictions on the types of medication permitted on board for officers at sea, which can create challenges for individuals managing ongoing health needs. Officers at sea reported concerns about the confidentiality of medical information shared with captains or medical officers, citing past negative experiences. In addition, medication supply can become an issue when contracts are extended, leaving leaders and officers without sufficient doses of essential medication. This affects individuals relying on hormone replacement therapy, antidepressants, contraceptives, or other needed medications, creating barriers to both safety and career progression.

Informal power networks

Personal relationships and unequal access

Informal relationships play a significant role in leadership progression within the maritime industry. Several leaders reported that captain recommendations often carry more weight than work experience, sometimes disadvantaging candidates who are female, queer, or from non-preferred nationalities.

> " Socially, it's very male-dominated—golf days, shooting days, things I wouldn't be invited to purely based on gender. Relationships are built during these events, so being excluded can potentially affect my career. I find it hard to nurture relationships because I'm not actively social with colleagues. The culture is heavily male-dominated and alcohol-focused. "
>
> (European Mid-Level Leader)

In many cases, key business decisions, promotions, and even hiring opportunities are influenced by interactions in male-dominated social spaces. One leader described, "It's a boys' club. They go drinking, to the yacht club. If you're not there, you are cut out of these spheres. It has definitely affected me and confused me as to how my trajectory could have gone" (African Mid-Level Leader).

These types of activities also exclude individuals who have limited time outside of work, do not drink alcohol, or feel alienated in certain environments. While some companies have started addressing these issues, for example by introducing policies banning strip clubs as company entertainment, leaders noted that the industry still has progress to make in creating fully inclusive environments for building professional relationships.

Providing transparent career support

Tokenism

Many interviewees expressed anxiety about the harm caused by superficial efforts to increase diversity in leadership without implementing policies that enable them to succeed. They felt self-conscious about being judged on factors other than their competence and abilities. Several leaders shared sentiments such as, "The last thing I want is to have people assume that I or anyone else has been placed in a role simply to fill a diversity quota" (African C-Suite Leader) and "people question the credibility of my promotion. They think I got it easily because of my gender and not my hard work. This isn't fair because I worked hard if not twice as hard" (African Entry-Level Leader). These experiences reveal how discouraging it can feel when identity, rather than contributions, is the focus.

> " I approached someone senior whom I viewed as a mentor, seeking guidance and advice on pursuing my ambitions. During our conversation, the individual said, 'I'll let you know if they need a girl like you.' That comment hit hard. I didn't want to be considered for a senior role or a board position just because I'm a woman; I wanted to be recognised for my capabilities and contributions. It was disappointing to realise that, despite my professional achievements, this individual primarily saw me as a 'girl in our organisation.' He suggested that being a woman could be an advantage—which I can understand to some extent—but it was disheartening to feel that my gender overshadowed my skills and experience. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Strengthening leadership communities

Strengthening leadership communities emerged as a key recommendation to diversify maritime leadership. Mentorship was one of the most frequently cited factors that supported interviewees' leadership progression. However, as one interviewee noted, "While I have been fortunate to have had access to mentorship under a good leader, this is not the norm across the industry. Access to mentorship and training opportunities for women and minority groups is still uneven, and more systemic efforts are needed to bridge this gap" (Asian Senior-Level Leader).

Strong networks often play a crucial role in facilitating mentorship and helping individuals identify role models. Interviewees highlighted the value of cross-industry initiatives such as the Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA) and Maritime SheEO, as well as the importance of internal associations and networks within companies and unions. The presence of these groups alone signals that a company is inclusive. One queer leader recalled feeling uncertain early in his career due to a seemingly masculine-dominated culture, saying, "I specifically remember worrying, would it be ok to be 'out' here? I would have been relieved to see that there was a queer network" (European Mid-Level Leader).

It is also critical to examine access to upskilling opportunities and identify systemic barriers that may prevent equitable participation. For example, funding for leadership training or development programmes may be limited to certain demographics, unintentionally restricting opportunities for others.

Adapting the way things are done

Multiple leaders emphasised that diversifying maritime leadership requires understanding and accommodating the distinct needs of different groups. Despite recent initiatives to hire more women, many shipping companies still lack fundamental policies such as maternity and paternity leave. One leader highlighted this gap: "I was speaking to one of the clients who has female crew on permanent contracts, and they admitted they don't yet know how to handle maternity leave or wages during that time. These issues need to be addressed beforehand" (European Mid-Level Leader).

> " As the shore-based shipping industry has adapted to become a more balanced work environment, it has allowed for a more diverse workforce. Previously, socialising was a big way to get noticed and promoted, but that's no longer as essential at my company. "
>
> (European Mid-Level Leader)

Networks and associations can play a crucial role in connecting leaders and ensuring their different needs and perspectives are considered in company decision-making. One leader shared that, as part of a DEI task force, they helped make company policies more inclusive by allowing employees to swap the dominant culture's religious holidays for their own religious observances, redefining "family" to include adoptive parents for parental leave, and introducing mourning leave in cases of miscarriage. Another leader described conducting a human rights audit that led to changes such as adding gender transition care to company medical insurance and allowing employees to display pronouns on business cards and email signatures.

Leaders also emphasised that maritime roles could be made significantly more inclusive for working parents through greater flexibility in job design. Suggested improvements included introducing comprehensive parental leave policies, assigning core working hours, offering part-time roles, enabling employees working at sea to transition to a career on shore, reducing offsite training requirements, providing private lactation rooms, and establishing structured return-to-work programmes for parents. Such measures would not only alleviate employer concerns about hiring leaders of childbearing age but also improve employee well-being and retention of leaders across genders and nationalities.

> " I've been fortunate to work for companies with progressive parental leave policies, which I think has contributed to my longevity in the industry. Not all companies operate this way, and it's something we should explore at an industry-wide level. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

2.3   Professional relationships
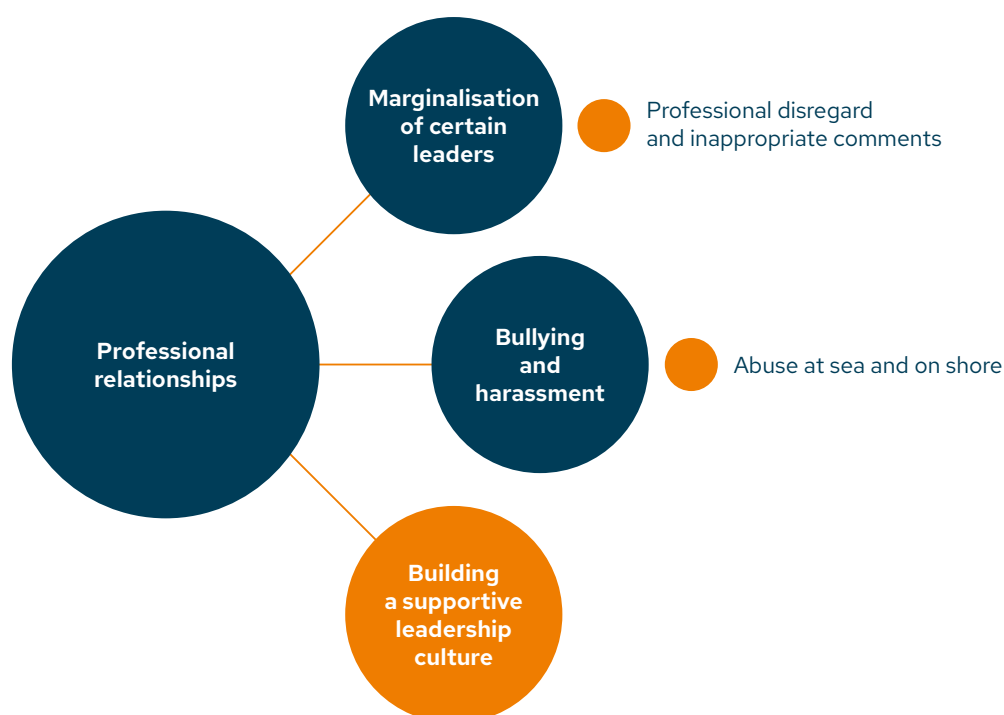
Social interactions with peers, colleagues, and clients can also be barriers to diversifying maritime leadership. Many interviewees shared experiences of marginalisation throughout their careers. These were subtle, everyday moments that signalled they were being treated differently or did not fully belong. These quiet slights, though often unspoken, can create a persistent sense of exclusion.

Some leaders also described facing bullying or harassment based on aspects of their identity, such as gender or ethnicity. Such negative interactions can have lasting impacts and remain a significant issue in parts of the maritime industry.

Positive professional relationships are key to meaningfully improving leadership diversity. This involves prioritising strong communication skills within teams, addressing unacceptable behaviour promptly and effectively, supporting those affected, and cultivating professional communities that are genuinely respectful and supportive.

Marginalisation of certain leaders

Professional disregard and inappropriate comments

> " I have seen women in meetings treated as admin support even though they are experts in their field. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Several leaders reported having their expertise dismissed or undervalued because of aspects of their identity. One participant expressed frustration, saying, "My helicopter view is always unfairly challenged, and I have to go hundreds of extra miles to prove the obvious" (European Mid-Level Leader). Another said, "Being taken seriously is really difficult at times. I'm almost 40, yet people often treat me as if I've just left school. Being recognised as a serious contributor in this industry is challenging. Your input is often undervalued, and it's not something I feel my male colleagues encounter" (North American Senior-Level Leader).

This kind of disregard often shows up through inappropriate task assignments unrelated to a person's role or rank. As one African leader explained, "I think I tick every bias box. I'm a woman, Black, and single, and I've always been in management. You sit in a meeting and they say, 'We need coffee.' At first, I'd get up and organise it, then I thought, 'No, you can get your own coffee!' These stereotypes are already there" (African Mid-Level Leader). Marginalisation also takes the form of explicit, often joking remarks that single out individuals and imply reduced competence. One leader described a meeting where an operations manager remarked during a technical discussion, "The welds weren't great—maybe it was the welder's wife who did it." The interviewee noted, "This was said in an external meeting where I was the only woman, and I felt really uncomfortable" (Asian Senior-Level Leader).

> " During a meeting, a senior male leader cut me off and pointedly told me that as a woman, I needed to understand my 'place'. This incident was both shocking and demoralising. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Subtler forms of bias were also reported. One respondent recounted, "As the first Indian to join the office from sea staff, I encountered mixed reactions. While some colleagues treated me well, others made sarcastic or biased remarks tied to my ethnicity. It was apparent that some were uncomfortable with an Indian in a leadership role, and I felt there was partiality in how I was treated" (Asian Senior-Level Leader).

Language choices can also unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. One leader pointed out that terms like "blacklist a candidate" or "whitelist an individual" are widely used but carry problematic connotations. Adopting neutral alternatives such as "allowlist" and "denylist" can contribute to creating a more inclusive environment.

Bullying and harassment

Abuse at sea and on shore

Bullying and harassment remain serious challenges in the maritime industry, both at sea and on shore. Several leaders interviewed shared firsthand experiences of abuse and sexual assault at sea. These incidents are not isolated and have broader effects across the industry. One educator reflected on the well-known "Midshipman X" case, where a cadet was sexually assaulted by a senior leader on a commercial vessel: "This was hugely discouraging—not just for women but for male cadets too. They would ask, 'Is that what it's like out there? Why would I want to be part of that?' We work hard to protect cadets and midshipmen, but cases like this create fear and deter people from joining the profession" (North American Senior-Level Leader).

> " When I was in a senior role nine or ten years ago, some people found an email from my doctor talking about my oestrogen prescription. Within 15 minutes, everyone knew. I was on that ship for another six weeks. The verbal abuse started, some physical assaults, people slapping me on the ass, one person spat at me, lots of unpleasant comments. I spiralled into depression. That's the only time I have ever walked off a ship when it came into port. I spiralled into depression badly and stopped the hormones, which had a negative impact and made me put on a lot of weight. "
>
> (North American Senior-Level Leader)

Abuse also occurs on shore, particularly when leaders are perceived as "out of place." One example came from a company party: "I was harassed by someone I admired and considered a friend. He was intoxicated and made inappropriate comments about my body, suggested my past behaviour had been sexually inviting, and shared fantasies about me. I went home feeling upset and saddened that he thought this behaviour was acceptable"(European C-Suite Leader).

> **"** I've had stalkers who thought it was acceptable to send me poems, enter my cabin uninvited, or stare at me during my watch. I've confronted people for taking my photo without consent, and they've cried rather than apologise. I've been given inappropriate nicknames that were impossible to shake off because the men thought they were compliments.
>
> (European Entry-Level Leader) **"**

Unfortunately, many interviewees said they have had to endure harassment without proper support, especially those working on short-term contracts who fear being labelled as 'troublemakers'. One person described how she tried to handle a situation on her own rather than seek support, "I once had someone use a derogatory sexual term for me at work in front of others. I chose not to report it. The easiest way was to laugh it off and make a joke that put them on the spot. While it didn't deeply affect me, it crossed a line. You have to shut these things down quickly because allowing them to continue can lead to a loss of respect" (European Senior-Level Leader). Several other interviewees described using similar coping mechanisms.

Building a supportive leadership culture

Conversely, many interviewees' positive experiences stem from interactions with supportive colleagues. Leaders recalled positive moments at events like International Women's Day and Pride, for example, that presented opportunities for wider communities to show that they are on their side.

According to the leaders interviewed, many companies lack robust systems for reporting, investigating, and responding to unacceptable behaviours, both at sea and on shore. One interviewee noted, "While I haven't personally faced barriers related to my gender, race, or ethnicity, I've observed that the maritime industry generally lacks formal mechanisms for addressing concerns, particularly for shore-based staff. The absence of structured channels for raising complaints or concerns, as well as defined metrics for resolving issues, can create challenges for shore-based employees. Strengthening these mechanisms would help ensure that all staff, regardless of their role or location, have access to fair and transparent processes for addressing their concerns" (Asian Mid-Level Leader).

> " There have been scenarios where I have felt that my capability was questioned; however, I had adequate support and guidance from the technical leaders, which helped me tackle such scenarios. The impact that it had on me is difficult to measure, but I would say that I came out of it stronger. "
>
> (Asian Mid-Level Leader)

Leadership helps set the tone of the workplace culture. Many interviewees stressed the importance of others who helped and inspired them. For instance, "Every manager that I have had has helped shape my career in one way or another. They had no issue whatsoever with advancing a woman in the industry. They believed in the importance of diversity, and I genuinely don't think I would have been here had they not embraced my growth" (African C-Suite Leader).

Another aspect is support from peers and team members, "What has made my leadership experience in maritime truly positive is the energy of the people in this industry. Even as a non-seafarer, I've felt welcomed and embraced, regardless of my background" (Asian Mid-Level Leader).
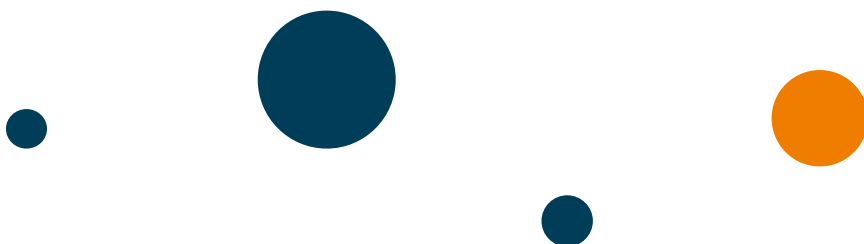
3. Conclusion

The leaders who contributed interviews to this report revealed a vast, untapped potential within maritime leadership. While many have forged meaningful, successful careers, too many skilled individuals still encounter barriers that prevent them from contributing fully. These missed opportunities limit individual growth and weaken the industry's ability to innovate, compete, and meet the growing global demand for talent.

This report aims to serve as a foundation for maritime leaders to reflect on how they, their companies, and the wider industry operate on a daily basis. It highlights key challenges leaders face, including persistent stereotypes, marginalisation, and unclear leadership pathways.

The interview data pointed to three critical areas of focus:

1. Societal norms and expectations that unconsciously narrow perceptions of leadership

2. Company policies and culture that may unintentionally hinder leadership development for certain groups

3. Professional and social interactions that can either empower or diminish strong leaders.

Simply hiring diverse leaders is not enough. Inclusive practices are essential to ensure that all leaders can thrive within the maritime industry. While the six barriers identified in this report appear deeply embedded, they are not insurmountable. Encouragingly, the 108 interviews also identified practical 'bridges,' with courageous leaders already demonstrating how change is possible to the benefit of future leaders, their companies, and the entire industry.

Diversifying maritime leadership is critical not only for stronger business outcomes but also for advancing social and environmental impact, improving workforce satisfaction and engagement, and building resilience in the face of a global talent shortage. As highlighted throughout this report, achieving broad, lasting change begins person by person, day by day, through the way organisations meet everyday needs, shape processes, and foster inclusive interactions. By doing so, the maritime industry can drive systemic change and create a future where every leader has the opportunity to reach their full potential and lead with impact.

4. Methodology

To better understand the 'barriers' and 'bridges' that shape leadership progression in the maritime industry, the Global Maritime Forum and member companies of the All Aboard Alliance interviewed a range of industry leaders about their leadership experiences.

An interview guide was developed in a joint process in the Diversifying Maritime Leadership workstream to explore both the positive and negative experiences of leaders across the maritime industry. During the interviews, information was gathered on participants' careers—such as rank and sector— as well as demographic details including gender, age, nationality, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, disability, and any other aspects of identity they chose to disclose. The interviews were guided by the following set of questions.

1. What has made your leadership experience in maritime a positive experience for you? Please provide examples.

2. As a leader in maritime, what has been your biggest challenge?

3. Have you ever faced any particular barriers that you believe were related to your gender, race, ethnicity, or any other aspect of your identity while in a leadership role within the maritime industry? If so, please provide some examples (e.g., access to resources, training, or mentorship opportunities).

4. When/if you have experienced such situations in your leadership career, would you attribute this experience to a particular individual(s) or to systemic issue in maritime?

5. Can you recount a specific situation where you felt your authority or capability as a leader was questioned due to bias or discriminatory attitudes? What happened, and how did it impact you personally and professionally?

6. Would you say that bias or discriminatory attitudes has had a negative impact on your career progression and opportunities to date? If so, please provide examples.

7. Have you personally seen or experienced systemic bias or discrimination against particular social identity groups during your time as a leader in maritime? If yes, please elaborate.

8. Do you see any systemic issues or practices within the maritime industry that prevent minority leaders from advancing? If so, please elaborate.

9. Do you have any experience from outside maritime you would like to mention?

10. Is there something I have not asked about, that you think I should have?

Methodology

Project group leaders from 16 companies conducted 96 interviews. After identifying gaps in the respondents' demographic profiles, the Global Maritime Forum conducted 12 additional interviews. All responses were anonymised before the analysis. The goal of the analysis was to identify how to enable more inclusive leadership pipelines that would allow for more leadership diversity across the maritime industry.

The Global Maritime Forum and the All Aboard Alliance would like to thank all the industry leaders who contributed their stories to this report, and the following companies for conducting interviews in the Diversifying Maritime Leadership workstream.

- **Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement**
- **bp shipping**
- **Bureau Veritas**
- **FedNav**
- **G2 Ocean**
- **GasLog**
- **Hafnia**
- **Mitsui O.S.K. Lines**
- **OCIMF**
- **Synergy Marine Group**
- **Turtle**
- **Svitzer**
- **MISC**
- **Cargill Ocean Transportation**

4.1   Study scope and limitations

Member companies were encouraged to recruit leaders for interviews who would provide broad representation, not only in terms of gender, but across a wide range of social demographics. The definition of diversity used for this report encompasses various dimensions that distinguish historically marginalised groups, including gender, socio-economic background, religion, education, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, neurodiversity, and life experiences. These differences shape perceptions and opportunities, bringing unique perspectives to any group, organisation, or industry. Leadership in the maritime industry encompasses entry-level, mid-level, senior-level, and C-suite executives. Both leaders who work in onshore and offshore roles in the maritime industry were included. The findings of this report therefore hold relevance beyond the All Aboard Alliance, and across the maritime industry.

In total, 108 people were interviewed, 65 of whom identified as women, 42 as men, and one chose not to disclose their gender. Most respondents were Millennials or Generation X, which is consistent with the fact that most respondents came from mid- and senior leadership roles. Despite an overall gender imbalance in favour of women, there is a similar spread of leadership levels across both genders (see table 2). Most leaders worked in operational departments, followed by technical and support functions.

Leaders included in the study

Entry-level leaders: Individuals who have recently transitioned into leadership roles. They can provide insights into the initial challenges faced in these positions.

Mid-level leaders: Those with some experience in leadership roles are navigating the complexities of middle management. They can discuss ongoing challenges and the support needed for career progression.

Senior-level leaders: Executives and high-ranking officials who have substantial experience.

C-suite executives: Top executives such as CEOs, CFOs, and COOs can provide insights into the highest levels of leadership, the barriers they overcame, and their vision for fostering diversity within the organisation. They can also offer perspectives on long-term challenges and strategies that helped them succeed.

Silent Generation (1925-1945)	1
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	7
Generation X (1965-1979)	39
Millennials (1980-1994)	51
Generation Z (1995-2012)	9

Table 1: *Interviewed leaders by age*

Methodology

	C-Suite Executive Leadership	Senior-level leadership	Mid-level leadership	Entry-level leadership	No Response
Male	10%	31%	38%	21%	0%
Female	14%	32%	31%	22%	2%
Total	12%	31%	33%	21%	2%

Table 2: *Interviewed leaders by gender and seniority*

The interviewees cited 35 different countries of origin, with European countries being the most frequently mentioned (45), followed by Asian (31), North American (14), African (7), South American (6), and Oceanian countries (1). While this reflects a strong global sample of leaders, the analysis is limited by the absence of respondents from the Philippines, Indonesia, Russia, and Ukraine, countries that supply the most seafarers globally.[3]
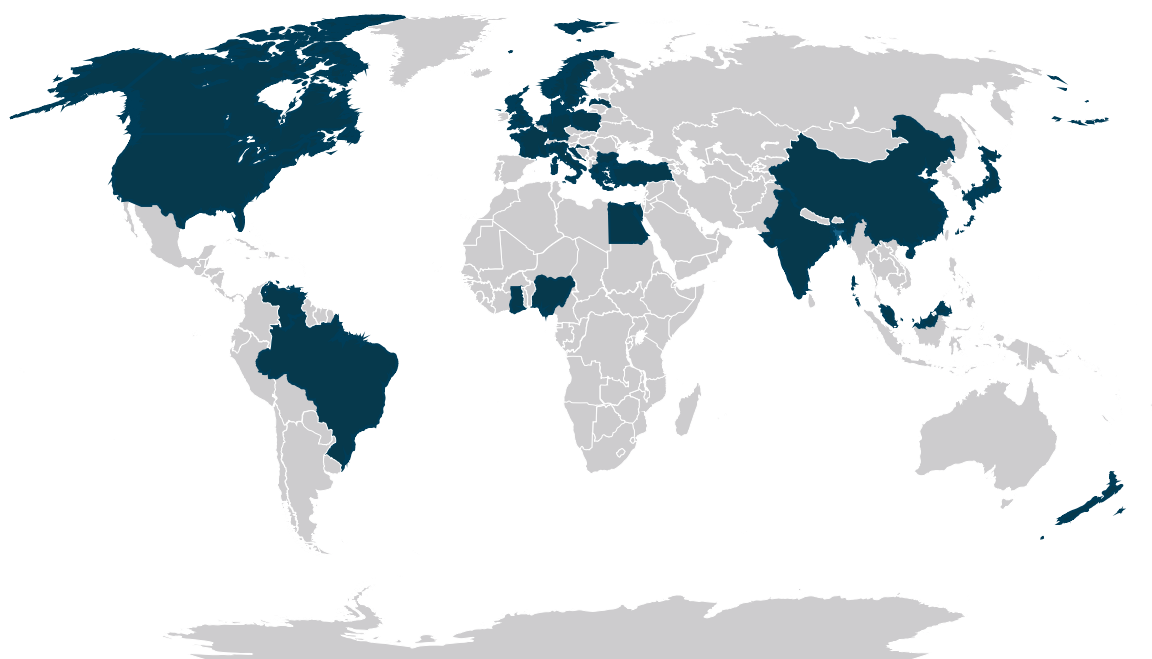

Figure 7: *Interviewed leaders by country of origin*

Of the 108 leaders interviewed, 11 identified as LGBTQ+, including four who identified as transgender. This proportion is close to the global average of 9% of adults identifying as LGBTQ+, and 1% as transgender.[4]

---

3   BIMCO & International Chamber of Shipping. (2021). S*eafarer Workforce Report: The Global Supply and Demand for Seafarers* in 2021 (2021 ed.). Witherbys.

4   Ipsos. (2023). *LGBT+ Pride 2023 global survey.*

A few respondents mentioned conditions such as ADHD or dyslexia but did not elaborate on whether it affected their careers. Despite attempts to do so, no individuals with physical or learning disabilities were interviewed, meaning this perspective is not represented in the findings.

It is important to note that this sample was selected to focus on those who have succeeded in becoming leaders in the maritime industry and does not include those who left the industry due to barriers, discrimination, or other reasons. Additionally, the largest sample groups are related to gender, which means that evidence is strongest in relation to gender issues in diversifying maritime leadership. These limitations may result in partial understandings of retention and the equitable progression of diverse groups in the maritime industry.

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.

Learn more about the Global Maritime Forum and its work on human sustainability at **www.globalmaritimeforum.org**.

All Aboard Alliance member companies:

- **AET Tankers**
- **Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement**
- **bp shipping**
- **Bureau Veritas**
- **Caravel Group**
- **Cargill Ocean Transportation**
- **Chevron Shipping Company**
- **CMB.TECH**
- **Danaos Corporation**
- **Diana Shipping Inc.**
- **Dorian LPG**
- **Fleet Management**
- **GasLog**
- **Gorrissen Federspiel**
- **Hafnia**
- **Höegh Autoliners**
- **International Seaways**
- **Lloyd's Register**
- **MISC**
- **Mitsui O.S.K. Lines**
- **Navigator Gas**
- **Navios Maritime Partners**
- **Philippine Transmarine Carriers**
- **PSA BDP**
- **Purus**
- **RightShip**
- **Rio Tinto**
- **Shell**
- **Stena**
- **Swire Shipping**
- **Synergy Marine Group**
- **Turtle**

Founding knowledge partners:

- **Global Maritime Forum**
- **Diversity Study Group**
- **Swiss Re Corporate Solutions**