

Women below deck

Gender and employment on British passenger liners, 1860–1938

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Conflicts have always occurred when women have entered male workplaces, and the sea is no exception; women's presence on board ship has caused considerable anxiety among male sailors. Whilst this has never stopped women from going to sea, before the nineteenth century they seldom signed ships' articles or received proper wages for their work. In the nineteenth century, however, formal employment opportunities became available to women, mostly in the passenger trades. However, modern gender ideology, whilst granting women access to maritime employment, provided them only with strictly limited career opportunities. On the one hand, women's work at sea became more formal and regulated, on the other hand their opportunities narrowed considerably.¹

Maritime and gender historians' interest in women at sea began in earnest in the 1970s and the volume of research expanded considerably from the 1980s onwards.² During the last decade, interest in women at sea has widened into the study of gender relations at sea, and of ships as masculine domains.³ Despite this increasing volume of work, however, few studies have focused in detail on women's employment at sea. While there has been considerable interest in particular women in heroic or masculine roles, little has been written on women who performed paid work on British steamships.⁴ On the contrary, recent studies on gender and seafaring, for example Lisa Norling's excellent book on New England women and whale fishery, have shifted the focus away from sea to maritime women in shoreside communities.⁵ Furthermore, the focus is shifting back to men in order to look at how gender matters also in male-dominated workplaces such as ships.⁶ Those interested in gender, especially in women's role in seafaring, tend to regard the matter of seagoing women as closed. However, modern maritime labour history is very much women's history. Now that seafaring labour is truly globalised and cheap labour intensively sought after, women comprise a significant element of the maritime work force. According to a recent estimate by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) in Cardiff, women make up about 18–20 per cent of the total work force on cruise liners. In some European countries, such as Finland, women comprise 43 per cent of unionised seafarers.⁷ Women, however, still dominate in the lower ranks in the occupational

hierarchy and they work below decks in relatively unskilled and low-paid jobs mainly in the catering department.

By the mid-nineteenth century, women's formal employment was concentrated almost exclusively on passenger liners and therefore their paid work at sea was strongly related to the development of passenger shipping.⁸ This article concentrates on women employed on British passenger liners as part of the catering personnel. At sea, women found employment only in domestic-service roles already available to them in the land-based labour market. Especially the relatively stagnant characteristics of women's employment at sea will be discussed. The article explores this element of continuity in a period of substantial technological and social change in British shipping, namely the unchanging gendered patterns of employment of the maritime labour force. First, some general characteristics of women's position in the labour market will be outlined in order to provide a clearer focus for the following sections, which will concentrate on women's employment in a slightly narrower context. It argues that women's employment was persistently associated with their domestic role in the family. After the First World War they increasingly replaced men in jobs where they were cheaper or in employment which required 'flexibility', i.e. irregular working hours and lack of promotion.⁹

Second, the organisation of the female work force and its recruitment will be illustrated and the career patterns analysed. In a sense women's employment was viewed as a cause of friction on board, and they were seen as being suitable only to positions that did not require any authority. It is argued here that gender was a major principle along which the stewards' section was organised. Stewardesses, female bath attendants and laundry workers were organised in their own sub-groups, work organisation which ensured that women were recruited only to a restricted range of positions with a heavy bias towards household tasks.

The core statistical data for this study are derived from crew lists and agreements for British merchant ships, 1861–1938.¹⁰ Other main sources include the British parliamentary papers, shipping companies' archives, emigrant diaries, memoirs and other personal recollections of seafarers. Furthermore, some biographical accounts are available of women who worked at sea.¹¹ Guidebooks and handbooks for employment on British passenger liners are also used.

Women's choice in the labour market

Historians have seen the separation of home and work as one of the most important areas in maintaining or weakening sexual segregation.¹² As the family-based work system declined and production became capital-intensive and more dependent on wage labour, sex-role segregation tightened considerably. This also happened in seafaring in Europe. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries sailing and fishing were more commonly based on the family or community. Groups of family members owned boats or ships, for example in the Åland Islands of Finland, and all the necessary tasks were

shared among the family.¹³ From the 1830s the expansion of industry began to change this pattern. A growing number of crew members were hired on a wage-labour basis and women increasingly stayed at home. The bigger the ships became, and the further they sailed, the less usual it became for women to go to sea.

In order to understand how maritime women fit into the broader labour force, we need to explore ideas about women's employment in general. In discussing women's work, it is crucial to understand that generalisations between women's and men's work should not be made. Women's working lives were different from men's. Women did not fit into men's occupational categories, neither did they have careers. A certain vagueness and definitional imprecision are typical of women's work, and women's professions are not as easily classified as men's. Seawomen are a good example, as their classification in the professional hierarchy is sometimes almost impossible. Women's waged work has not followed the same norms as that of men. It is often difficult to draw a line between unpaid domestic work and work for wages at home (as with captains' seagoing wives, who were sometimes paid by the shipping company to clean the captain's cabin and do his laundry), as the latter is easily confused either with work for wages outside the home economy, such as taking in washing or looking after neighbours' children. Women did not normally stay in formal employment through life as men did and their choice in the labour market was very limited. Some reasons for these characteristics are detailed below.

The changes in gender politics in the nineteenth century along with the growth of capitalist production decreased women's possibilities and freedom of choice, especially in the labour market. As Deborah Simonton notes, women's options in the labour market decreased and a sharper division of labour emerged from industrial change at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The notion of women as weak and in need of protection was bolstered in the nineteenth century when the breadwinner ideology and the idea of women's domesticity became a norm in gender relations in Europe. The notion of women being incapable of 'heavy' or 'dangerous' work was an important characteristic of the modern view of them, even if it did not reflect the reality of most working-class or single women. This view was a very effective factor in securing female exclusion from the public sphere. A notion of female limitations is not new, yet the nineteenth century tightened the idea of women's physical and emotional frailty.

Women were doing different work from men in two senses: first, the work itself was different and, second, the women were usually on a lower rung in the employment hierarchy. The view developed that women should not be competitive in the same areas as men; moreover, it was perhaps more desirable that they should not be competitive at all. When women move into the sphere of wage labour they often perform commercialised forms of the same activities they would do at home, which centre on serving and caring for other people.¹⁵ The moral mission of the European woman was to provide tenderness, nurture, moral purity and support for her menfolk and, ideally,

to have no contact with the world of work whatsoever.¹⁶ Working women, especially married ones, were seen as unnatural, immoral and bad mothers, and, most important, as taking men's work.¹⁷ Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman have described the changes that occurred from the early nineteenth century onwards as marking a second significant period of gender conflict in the labour market (the first occurred in the period from the late fifteenth century to the end of the sixteenth). The consequences of both crises were 'a more clearly specified gendering of jobs, new restrictions on the employment of women, and a reduction in the value placed on women's work associated with a greater emphasis on their domestic positions in the family'.¹⁸ Apart from short-term gains by women in the labour market during the First World War, they continued earning less than men and the majority of people were still of the opinion that a woman's place was at home. In Britain, remarkable hostility towards married women's employment persisted, and education authorities, the civil service and many industrial employers operated the marriage bar, which effectively hampered women's right to work.¹⁹

Comfort and guidance for female passengers

The ideology of separating the sexes on emigrant ships created the need for women's employment at sea; a stewardess was to act as the women passengers' representative on board and help with seasickness and other needs of an intimate nature. In third class matrons were also to oversee the segregation of the single women travellers. The separation of the sexes was completed by the 1880s, by which time stewardesses were employed on virtually all deep-sea voyages.

Matrons were normally engaged for third-class passengers. The work of a third-class stewardess or a matron was different from the work of a first-class stewardess. It was not regarded as requiring any special skills, and therefore many shipping companies hired an emigrant to do the job.²⁰ The third-class stewardess's first and foremost task was to be constantly present in the steerage section and to act as an initial point of contact for women emigrants. The general opinion was that the third-class stewardess did not have to be experienced in waiting, unlike the first-class ones, but instead had to be capable of acting 'as an ever present domestic instructor', who was to oversee the chastity and segregation of the women travellers.²¹ Usually the women employed in the steerage were of the same nationality as the majority of the passengers, which indicates that they also acted as interpreters. The procedure was for female passengers to report their complaints or requests to a stewardess, which she in turn would report to a steward, and the steward to the officers or to the captain, if needed.²² Therefore she acted also as the women's representative on board.

Women's role at the beginning of the period was to enforce the separation of the sexes, especially among emigrants. Towards the end of the nineteenth century their role changed somewhat. When competition between shipping

companies intensified and the level of comfort offered to passengers (rather than speed) became a more important factor in sea travel, a woman's first and foremost task on board became to provide a relaxing crossing for female and child passengers. By the inter-war period, when the emigrant element had declined and cruises had become more common, providing increasingly luxurious conditions for wealthy women passengers took most of the stewardess's time. At the same time, slightly more employment opportunities became available: women were used as bath attendants, nurses, hairdressers, masseuses and swimming pool attendants. However, the essential purpose of their presence at sea remained: they were employed to satisfy the needs of women travellers. Even if a wider range of jobs became available to them, their relative numbers increased only slightly and only on the largest liners. Nor did they manage to break away from the domestic-service role assigned to them both at sea and in land-based society. Women were employed at sea in very similar roles to those in British society in general, where domestic service and laundry work were traditional women's occupations.²³

At the beginning of the period only one woman per ship was employed to attend to the first-class female passengers. By the 1870s the carrying of a stewardess and a surgeon had become an asset for passenger liner companies.²⁴ Cunard's rules for its employees already stated in 1885 that the surgeon must be accompanied by a stewardess or a friend of a patient when visiting lady passengers.²⁵ In 1881 the largest emigrant ships carried two or even four stewardesses and matrons, and by 1911 large transatlantic liners commonly employed sixteen to nineteen stewardesses, even in winter, when traffic was quiet. The greater need for stewardesses may also have arisen because of the fierce competition between shipping companies over emigrant passengers. Emigrants often travelled in family groups, and therefore companies offered special 'family rates' with reduced charges for children.²⁶ Apart from legislative requirements, competition drove the shipping companies to offer improved provision for these groups. As early as 1852 Cunard's *Arabia* had a children's nursery, although the next Cunarders to have a similar facility were *Campania* and *Lucania* in 1893.²⁷

As Table 1 suggests, the relative number of women crew remained small, even on passenger liners.²⁸ In 1861 women made up less than one per cent of the crew on Cunard's North Atlantic liners.²⁹ At the beginning of the period there was usually one woman employed per ship who always worked as a stewardess. Towards the end of the period there were numerically more of them on the big liners, but the number of catering personnel had also increased substantially and women still comprised only one per cent of the total maritime work force.³⁰

The employment of women became more common with the growing number of wealthy women passengers and the services offered to them. By the end of the 1930s a separate female work force was created by the passenger liner companies in order to offer comfort and guidance for women as an expanding group of the travelling public. New technological innovations and restrictive US immigration legislation after 1921 shifted the focus of the liner

Table I Women seafarers enumerated in the census of England and Wales compared with the total number of seafarers, 1861–1931

Year	Male stewards and cooks	Female catering personnel	All catering personnel	Other merchant seafarers	All seafarers ^a	Catering personnel of maritime work force (%)	Women of the catering personnel (%)	Women of the maritime work force (%)
1861	1,471	146	1,617	94,665	97,899	2	9	0.2
1871	3,436	216	3,652	94,370	101,674	4	6	0.2
1881	6,381	386	6,767	95,093	108,627	6	6	0.4
1891	n.a.	389	n.a.	107,445	107,834	n.a.	n.a.	0.4
1901 ^b	26,205	995	27,200	154,700	209,100	13	4	0.6
1911	15,514	536	16,050	77,028	109,128	15	3	0.6
1921	23,865	923	24,788	99,056	148,632	17	4	0.8
1931	23,956	1,128	25,084	78,023	128,191	20	4	1.1

Notes

^a Figures in 1891 and 1901 include stewards and cooks.

^b I have used Valerie Burton's figures ('Counting seafarers: the published records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen, 1849–1913', *Mariner's Mirror* 71, 3, 1985) as well as *Return of the Number of Seamen employed in 1901 on Vessels registered under Part I of the Merchant Shipping Act, 1902*, BPP 1902. CXII. Table 'Estimated Total Numbers of Seamen', p. 279. to complement the census figures for 1901.

Source: Census of England and Wales, 1861–1931, occupation tables. (Many thanks to Jo Stanley for co-operating with these figures.)

companies from emigration to tourism. Travelling for pleasure and cruising became popular among women and created a demand for new service jobs on the ships. The following section will focus on different elements within the female maritime work.

There was a consensus that a woman needed a female employee as an initial point of contact and for her intimate needs. Frank T. Bullen described the prevailing ideology: 'Stewardesses are of course carried in British steamers; in fact they must be, for attendance upon the ladies.'³¹ According to the *Queen* magazine, an ideal stewardess was kindly and obliging, who 'often shows a degree of tenderness and human sympathy with women and children under disagreeable circumstances which can excite nothing but gratitude and respect in those to whom she ministers'.³² The *Ship's Steward's Handbook* defined a stewardess's role: 'The stewardess on all ships is required more particularly to attend to the wants of lady passengers.'³³

Serving meals, especially breakfast, to women's cabins was the stewardesses' duty. They were responsible for making the beds, helping women get ready for dinner and, if they were unwell, serving all meals in the cabin. Caring for seasick women and children still seems to have taken a great deal of their time. According to Maida Nixon, as long as there were seasick women on board the stewardess was on duty.³⁴ Anne Smith, another stewardess, gives similar testimony in her diary. She wrote of having 'rather an idle day' on 19 November 1927 on board, since no one was seasick.³⁵ It appears that weather conditions were a decisive factor in a stewardess's work load. Other specific women's tasks on board included looking after children and cleaning the ladies' bathrooms and lavatories.³⁶

Taking care of the linen was another responsibility gendered as female, and the linen store used to be the responsibility of a stewardess. According to Cunard's rules, 'when the ship is lying at any foreign port, the stewardesses are to be constantly employed, and every opportunity must be taken by them to keep the ship's linen in order'.³⁷ Charles Dickens travelled to America in 1842 on the *Britannia*, which carried a stewardess. He wrote of her tasks in *American Notes*, 'There was a stewardess, too, actively engaged in producing clean sheets and tablecloths from the very entrails of the sofas.'³⁸

Cunard's rules and regulations for passengers, published in 1840, stated that the sweeping of the saloon and ladies' cabins started at 5.00 a.m. and that only stewardesses were entitled to enter the ladies' cabins and state-rooms.³⁹ Stewardesses worked in their particular sections alongside male stewards, who were expected to perform some of the heavier tasks such as making up the upper berths. After the introduction of electricity on liners, passengers had electric bells in their state rooms which they rang once for a steward and twice for a stewardess. In practice the working hours of the stewardesses, as well as of the rest of the catering personnel, were unregulated and therefore unlimited. On quieter trips, or on days when the passengers were ashore, they received a welcomed break from the passengers. Anne Smith wrote in her diary of a Mediterranean cruise in January 1927: 'The ship is very quiet, nothing much to do. I have five rooms on the go and to

keep the empty rooms dusted . . . I have just finished reading *Kitty* by Warwick Deeping. Quite good.' After six days she wrote that she had just finished another book, *Onslaught* by Joan Sutherland.⁴⁰

Some passengers fully exploited the service provided by the stewardess, sometimes in a manner that prompted shipping companies to intervene. In the 1930s Cunard made an extra charge for passengers who wanted a private stewardess, took the stewardess away from her regular work or requested special attention.⁴¹ It is therefore likely that shipping companies, at least by the 1930s, had begun placing restrictions on the services provided to passengers, even in the first class.

The employment of nurses on passenger liners started during the First World War, when liners were used as hospital ships. The post of a nurse was a popular one, and therefore the passenger liner companies were able to employ well qualified nurses. P&O, for example, required its nurses to hold a professional certificate. From the 1920s onwards Cunard required a midwife's qualification of the nurses employed on the North Atlantic run, since it was not uncommon for third-class passengers to give birth during the voyage.⁴²

The organisation of women in the shipboard community

It must be stressed that, despite the expansion in female employment at sea, the vast majority of the catering department consisted of men throughout this period, and women entering into that world were limited to a very restricted number of roles. As already discussed, despite the numerical increase in women employed on passenger liners, the percentage of women employed at sea remained low. Furthermore, very few new employment opportunities became available for them. Apart from nurses, hairdressers and typists in the passenger department, the stewards' department was the only section within catering personnel where women were found. There were no women in the shipboard kitchens, let alone in the deck and engineers' departments. The reason why women did not work in shipboard kitchens was that they were never apprenticed by shipping companies and large liners often imitated Continental hotels and restaurants, where kitchens remained an all-male domain. The special concern here is how the numerical growth of female employment on big liners was handled from an organisational perspective and how women were accommodated within a maritime hierarchy which was traditionally male. We shall also see that female catering personnel were given hardly any degree of authority on board.

It was a common fear that the employment of women on board ship would be a cause of friction, as female personnel were regarded as being suitable only for positions that did not require any authority. Such an attitude was a reflection of a deep-seated view that women could not be trusted in dangerous situations, but the denial of authority to women was also justified on ideological grounds.⁴³

In general, women's employment in factories, or indeed anywhere away from home, was seen as dangerous to society and a factor that encouraged

inappropriate behaviour in the workplace.⁴⁴ During the late nineteenth century employment conditions were rearranged to separate men and women physically in the workplace. Catherine Hakim has argued that occupational segregation and the sex stereotyping of jobs were socially constructed by the mid-nineteenth century. The concern for the moral propriety of the working class was illustrated in the Gangs Act of 1867, which prohibited the employment of women and girls in gangs where men worked.⁴⁵ Similar measures were entailed by the Mines Act of 1842, which practically ended women's employment in mines. More precisely, it ended women's work underground, which was the best paid, and moved them above ground, where the work status and level of pay were low. Gradually they were completely excluded from every task in the mining industry.⁴⁶ Gender segregation in employment was followed not only because of moral reasons, but also in order to exclude women from the better-paid jobs. A similar concern was evident among urban white-collar workers at the time as women increasingly gained a foothold in employment. When their opportunities of clerical work expanded, women were kept strictly separate from men in the workplace. Separate floors, rooms or at least sections with their own staircases were provided for each sex. Sometimes women were not even allowed to leave the office at lunchtime, and they were provided with separate dining rooms and cloakrooms.⁴⁷

The gender segregation of tasks among the stewarding staff was established very soon after women became part of the work force. Women and men always worked under different job titles, and jobs located in public places like restaurants, bars and decks were reserved for men. Men worked as stewards in saloons, bedrooms and smoking rooms, as barkeepers, chefs, cooks, storekeepers and linen keepers. Women worked on passenger liners mainly as stewardesses, serving female passengers in their cabins. Other women worked as nurses, bath attendants, hairdressers, masseuses and laundresses. Women's employment in general tended to be based around different bodily functions, such as taking care of the sick, children and female passengers.

Table 2 reveals the restricted nature of women's employment on passenger liners. There were remarkably fewer job titles available for women compared with men in catering departments. The gender division of labour on passenger liners and the restricted employment of women in certain positions were partly maintained by the development and maintenance of separate channels of recruitment.

The catering personnel on board ship were organised not only on the basis of distinct sections and principles of seniority, but also according to gender. Men and women were always to be found with different job titles, usually organised in separate working units. Most women workers, such as stewardesses, were organised in their own sub-groups and, to some degree, were treated as separate units within the stewarding work force. For example, they had their own forewoman, a leading stewardess, who had no formal authority within the ship's hierarchy.

Bath attendants and laundry workers were organised in similar, predominantly female, groups to stewardesses. Bath attendants were needed to clean

Table 2 Different job titles available to male and female catering personnel on Cunard passenger liners, 1861–1938

<i>Year</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
1861	31	1
1871	35	1
1881	25	2
1891	34	2
1901	37	2
1911	98	6
1921	142	6
1931	198	11
1938	209	15 ^a

Notes

a Job titles available for women in 1938 were: Bath Attendant, Bookstall Attendant, Electric and Turkish Bath Attendant, Hairdresser, Laundress, Head Laundress (or Laundry Manageress/Head Washer), Laundry Clerk, Masseuse, Nurse, Nursery Stewardess, First Class Stewardess, Tourist Class Stewardess, Third Class Stewardess, Leading Stewardess (or First Stewardess/Chief Stewardess) and Swimming Pool Attendant. The stewardesses employed in different classes are listed separately since the distinction was regarded as important. Source Dataset 1861–1938.

women's toilets and bathing areas, while the separation of the sexes was once again the main motive for employing women. Laundresses were also employed on board to wash linen in order to relieve the pressure on port-based laundries and to guarantee the ship always had an adequate supply. When the turnabout of the liners became faster, the washing of the ships' linen was a constant problem for the shipping companies.⁴⁸

If there was a laundry on board, most of its workers were women. Washing the linen as well as the crew's and passengers' clothes was traditionally delegated to women whenever possible, even at sea. The head of the shipboard laundry was often a woman, although one or two men or boys worked within the gang as 'hydro men', since, according to the gender ideology, women were not regarded as capable of using machinery. The 'head laundress' or 'laundry manageress' led the gang with the head washer, who was also a woman. Often a 'laundry clerk' was also employed, who might keep count of incoming and outgoing laundry and the marking of linen and clothes. The women's average age was thirty-eight and many of them were over forty years old and employed on a temporary basis at sea. The average age of men was only twenty years.⁴⁹ By the 1960s, however, many British women had been replaced by foreign labour, such as Goanese men, particularly on P&O shipboard laundries.⁵⁰

The incentive to employ women reflects the strong identification of laundering and cleaning with female work. In this sense, women performed similar jobs at sea and on land, with a heavy bias towards household tasks. The organisation of laundresses and bath attendants followed very similar lines to that of stewardesses: women were organised in their own groups within the larger structure of the catering department, and had a separate female head who maintained group discipline and dealt with simple disputes. Such gendered hierarchical patterns were not peculiar to ships. Meta Zimmeck notes that the women's hierarchy in clerical work was organised along similar lines.

The women's hierarchy, even parallel to men's, terminated well below the managerial level, so that the most women could achieve was the supervision of other women. Women seldom, if ever, exercised power over men or even boys and were always, ultimately, under the control of men.⁵¹ Women were irreplaceable members of the ships' crew, however, since the ideology of feminine modesty and the gender-specific policy of customer service followed on all passenger liners prevented men from performing these tasks. Wealthy female passengers could not be left without the services they were used to on land, especially if equivalent services were offered to men.

Concern over the potential problems of physical proximity between the two sexes was also evident in the shipboard community. Every attempt was made to keep female and male seafarers separate. In practice this meant that careful attention was paid to women's behaviour in terms of a clear code of respectability. Nixson notes that female employees were forbidden to chat to stewards or passengers, except on work-related matters. She also claims that the female work force was entitled to spend its free time only in its cabins or in carefully designated areas on deck. In addition, stewards and stewardesses were forbidden to be together in the same cabin.⁵² On board emigrant ships women seafarers had to stay on the 'women's side' and in the first and second-class accommodation they were under the scrutiny of a purser and a steward. P&O's rules expressly advised pursers: 'You will have to see that the stewardesses are attentive to their duties and you are never to overlook the slightest appearance of levity on their part.'⁵³

They ate separately from men, in their own cabins, with child passengers or, later in the period, in their own mess.⁵⁴ By the 1920s Cunard stewardesses were no longer provided with their own sitting room or mess but were requested to take their meals in their own cabin instead of in the designated messroom.⁵⁵ They were not allowed to go ashore either with male members of the crew (even if they sometimes did) or with male passengers.⁵⁶ Women were constantly observed by the passengers and their superiors alike, as well as by male crew members, and in that sense they did not have much privacy. They had to be careful not to do anything inappropriate, or let something happen to them which could jeopardise their reputation, since it would have meant the end of their career. In particular, the use of alcohol and relations with men were issues that attracted the attention of superiors and fed the ship's gossip factory. Mrs Alda Wheeler was reported by the chief steward for 'being far too familiar with all the stewards and on being spoken to was most insolent. A change necessary.'⁵⁷ Miss Annie Vinten was reported as being 'too familiar with the men' and a change of ship was recommended in her case too.⁵⁸

Women's recruitment and gender-segregated labour markets

Although little is known about the early recruitment patterns of the passenger liner companies, particularly in relation to catering personnel, family connections were almost certainly important in the recruitment of women.

Judith Fingard has shown how almost all the stewardesses to be found in the shipping registers of St John's (Halifax) in the 1880s and the 1890s, with the exception of passenger steamships, were wives of someone on the ship. To that extent 'the employment of women was erratic and dependent on the arrangements their husbands were able to make on their behalf'.⁵⁹ By the inter-war period, stewardesses on passenger liners usually had to be recommended by someone connected with the sea or employed by the company.⁶⁰ Family connections and personal history were important, and women employed on passenger liners often had a strong maritime background. Previous extensive travel experience could also be regarded as a merit, especially on ocean passenger liners.⁶¹ For some positions, previous work experience in the company's office ashore was required.⁶² The lady superintendent, or her equivalent, who was responsible for the recruitment of women staff usually interviewed the applicants, but even in the absence of such a figure gender remained 'a crucial dividing force at this time in shipping offices'.⁶³

Age was an important factor in the recruitment of women. Maida Nixson, who worked as a stewardess, claimed that the stewardess on the trip when she crossed the Atlantic as a passenger was 'one of those fierce old dragons, crackling with starch and scorn'.⁶⁴ Motherly qualities and 'experience', which referred to mature age, were often mentioned when the role of women at sea was discussed. The Cunard magazine described two stewardesses as follows:

There are land mothers and sea mothers . . . The two of them are Mrs. Agnes Stevens and Mrs. Emily Dawkins, stewardesses of the Saxonnia, and 'Mother' Stevens and 'Mother' Dawkins to child voyagers, to nurses and soldiers during the war years, and to cabin boys, captains and other co-workers afloat the Atlantic.⁶⁵

References to the 'motherly' qualities of stewardesses are also to be found in a purser's account of women at sea as late as the 1950s: 'a few were young and attractive, but most were motherly types who inspired confidence in children and women travelling alone'.⁶⁶

The Cunard data set confirms the extent to which female catering staff were noticeably older than their male counterparts (Table 3). At the beginning of the period, in 1861, there was a very marked age difference between male and female catering personnel. There was very little change in the mean age of women employees between the mid-nineteenth century and the late 1930s, although the inter-war years witnessed a consistent upward trend in the mean age of male staff and a significant narrowing in the gender-specific age differential. In fact most large passenger liner companies had a relatively high minimum age of twenty-five for female employees, whereas male members of the catering department could be recruited from the age of fourteen years upwards.⁶⁷ The adoption and retention of an age-specific recruitment policy for catering personnel were justified by the claim that younger women were 'unreliable', which reflected a broader concern over the potentially disruptive effect of young women in workplaces traditionally dominated by men.⁶⁸

Table 3 Percentage of male and female catering personnel under twenty-five years of age, 1861–1938

Year	Stewardesses on Cunard	Stewards on Cunard	Stewardesses on all ships	Stewards on all ships
1861	0	42	14	33
1871	0	36	14	36
1881	0	28	11	38
1891	3	25	13	n.a.
1901	8	35	10	n.a.
1911	7	40	13	33
1921	2	25	16	24
1931	3	24	11	28
1938	2	18	n.a.	n.a.

Source Dataset 1861–1938, Occupational Censuses of England and Wales, 1861–1931.

As Table 3 suggests, stewardesses were much older than their male counterparts, and Cunard stewardesses were older than women seafarers in general, perhaps because of the difficulty of securing employment on the company's ships or as a result of its policy of not employing young women. As a whole, women went to sea at a more mature age than men. Apart from formal age restrictions, family commitments may have stopped some women from taking a berth at an earlier age.

Most of the women employed in the catering department were either single or widowed, a tendency that cannot be found in the recruitment of men. Women were often employed as a form of charity: the widows of company officers were employed instead of paying pensions to employees' families.⁶⁹ Articles in the *Queen* magazine from the 1930s criticised the recruitment practices of the big passenger liner companies:

The stewardess generally does her utmost; and the captain himself can do no more. But she has not had, like the captain, any special training for her duties. Steamship companies are too apt to regard the post of stewardess as an appointment for bestowal on a woman related to some member of their crew. The idea that a man's widow or daughter will be provided with a comfortable berth as stewardess is thought to make the service of passenger vessels more attractive.⁷⁰

In letters of application, women themselves appealed to employers by underlining their poor economic situation and the absence of a male breadwinner.⁷¹ The 1881 Liverpool shipping schedules, which reveal the marital status of seafarers, confirm that most of the stewardesses were widowed or unmarried. There was only one exception: a married woman of thirty-eight years of age who served on the coastal schooner *Voltaire*. On board there were two males with the same surname, and their ages indicate that one of them could have been her husband.⁷² There were an equal number of widows and unmarried women in the shipping schedules, but their average age varied (forty-two and a half and thirty-four years respectively). The evidence

suggests, therefore, that women either went to sea in their twenties and early thirties, then married, or took up a seafaring occupation as a widow. In any event, there was a strong consensus in society to keep married women out of employment, and Cunard operated a marriage bar for its female office workers. Whether they had the same policy towards their female seafaring staff is unclear, but there is no evidence of married women being employed on British passenger liners during the period, and women employed by P&O invariably left their post when they got married.⁷³

Not only marital status, but also personal appearance, was very important in job interviews, and good looks played a peculiar part in the recruitment of women.⁷⁴ Sometimes attractiveness and youth acted against women in such a situation. The evidence suggests that women tried not to appear too attractive. The presence of a young woman on board, as stewardess Violet Jessop put it, was almost a fetish for seamen. She wrote of her first interview in her memoirs:

The meeting seemed to go well from the start, until he remarked that he had misgivings. He enumerated his objections: I was far too young, they generally took officers' widows, and then again, I was too attractive . . . I gave him my word to be most circumspect and careful if he gave me a post as stewardess.⁷⁵

The stewardesses' outfit was meant to 'desexualise' them. Even at the end of the 1930s the Cunard–White Star uniform regulations required grey stockings and plain black shoes, with part or whole rubber heels; no short sleeves, skirts more than 10 in. from the ground or jewellery were to be worn when in uniform.⁷⁶ Jessop remembers the grey stewardesses' uniform resembling a nurse's outfit – or, more precisely, 'those of a prison wardress'.⁷⁷

During periods of high unemployment, when jobs in the catering department were less easy to obtain, the large passenger liner companies intensified their screening processes and monitored the background of female applicants in a more detailed fashion. Whereas detailed information on individual candidates was seldom retained prior to the First World War, by the early 1920s the P&O's Stewards' Register frequently contained a careful listing of the each applicant's background and the reasons for recruitment. The annual register recorded information on the background of over 65 per cent of the company's female employees in the 1920s and in the 1930s, while most of the remainder were women with long service with the company. In 1921, of those whose background was known, 50 per cent had been recommended by someone connected with the company, 19 per cent were related to someone employed by P&O and a further 19 per cent had had previous nursing experience.⁷⁸ In 1931, however, only 31 per cent of the stewardesses' background was recorded, which may be due to the fact that most of the women were former employees and their background was already known. Most of the newly recruited female staff had previous seafaring experience in another company, or had been recommended by someone influential connected with P&O. Only one was noted as having previous nursing experience.⁷⁹

By the 1920s big passenger liner companies like Cunard had a special Lady Superintendent who specifically handled the recruitment of women. This practice made it virtually impossible for a woman to break into any positions other than those traditionally gendered as female. The existence of separate recruitment channels for women and men maintained the gender segregation of labour, in a similar manner to the employment of Lascars and Chinese, with their own 'serangs', who were responsible for both discipline and recruitment.

Conclusion

At sea, women found employment only in domestic-service roles already available to them in the land-based labour market. They were employed almost exclusively in catering departments performing cleaning or laundering work and taking care of seasick women passengers. Stewardesses, bath attendants and laundry workers were organised in their own sub-groups, the work organisation which ensured, for its part, that women were recruited only to a restricted range of positions with a heavy bias towards household tasks.

The existence of the parallel recruitment channels for women was another measure that ensured that women did not break away from the limited number of roles available to them. Other gendered practices, such as the marriage bar, lack of training and the higher age of women ensured that they remained in traditional feminine jobs which had hardly any possibility of career advancement, at least not into supervisory positions. Women's employment was viewed as a cause of friction on board, and women were seen as suitable only for positions that did not require any authority. By the 1920s, however, a limited number of managerial positions had been created which were open to women, including the posts of Leading Stewardess and Head Laundress. For a woman to gain authority over a man on board ship, however, was exceptionally rare. Women were treated as a separate group in the catering department, even if they worked alongside their male counterparts. They had their own leading stewardesses and could work their way up the career ladder only within their own group. There was normally only one leading stewardess on the large passenger liners. Most female employees simply retired or left the service of a shipping company in the same position in which they started employment; if a woman initially took a berth as a stewardess, it was almost certain that she would retire as one.

The physical separation of sexes and a certain unease concerning women's presence on board limited their liberty and role at sea. Their numbers remained small and their employment opportunities and career prospects limited. Women's positions remained subordinate to men's. Among catering personnel, women gained some supervisory status, but always within the female context. Throughout the period, female crew's occupational role was to offer comfort, moral guidance and protection for women from male passengers. Women on board British vessels were seen as a necessary evil, but not as a major threat (as were foreigners) to British men's employment.

Notes

- 1 Dianne Dugaw, 'Female sailors bold: transvestite heroines and the markers of gender and class', in Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore MD, 1996), p. 34.
- 2 See, for example, Dianne Dugaw, 'Rambling female sailors: the rise and fall of the seafaring heroine', *International Journal of Maritime History* 4, 1 (1992), 179–94, 'Female Sailors Bold', and Suzanne J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women aboard Ship in the Age of Sail* (1998).
- 3 One of the most valuable books on seafaring and gender is Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore MD, 1996). Another good one is Colin Howell and Richard Twomey (eds), *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour* (New Brunswick NJ, 1991). Good insights into masculinity are offered by Valerie Burton, "'Whoring, drinking sailors": reflections on masculinity from the labour history of nineteenth-century British shipping', in Margaret Walsh (ed.), *Working Out Gender: Perspectives from Labour History* (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 84–101, and Margaret S. Creighton, "'Women" and men in American whaling, 1830–1870', *International Journal of Maritime History* 4, 1 (1992), 195–218. Gender in the dockers' community has been explored, for example, by Tapio Bergholm and Kari Teräs, 'Female dockers in Finland, c. 1900–1975: gender and change on the Finnish waterfront', *International Journal of Maritime History* 11, 2 (1999), 107–20.
- 4 The notable exception is Jo Stanley, who has published several articles on the female liner work force in the inter-war period. See, for example Jo Stanley, 'The company of women', *Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* 9, 2 (1999), 69–86, and 'Finding a brief flowering of typists at sea: evidence from a new Cunard deposit', *Business Archives, Sources and History* 76 (1998), 29–39. Studies from other European countries include Ursula Von Feldkamp, 'Die ersten Stewardessen auf bremischen Passagierschiffen', *Deutsche Schifffahrtsarchiv* 21 (1998), 83–100, which looks at the first stewardesses going out on German passenger steamers, and Carola Sundqvist, 'Kvinnor ombord', *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* 3 (1988), 489–510, which explores women's opportunities to work at sea in nineteenth-century Finland.
- 5 Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a Wife: New England Women and the Whalefishery, 1720–1870* (Chapel Hill NC, 2000).
- 6 See, for example, Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* (Harlow, 2003), and Laura Tabili, "'A maritime race": masculinity and the racial division of labor in British merchant ships, 1900–1939', in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920* (Baltimore MD, 1996), pp. 169–88.
- 7 Figure from the year 2003 by the Finnish Seamen's Union.
- 8 On modern passenger liners it was very exceptional for a woman to work in other than service-related jobs. Victoria Drummond, who worked as a marine engineer between 1922 and 1963, was a notable exception. See, for example, Cherry Drummond, *The Remarkable Life of Victoria Drummond, Marine Engineer* (1994). The above-mentioned studies of women's employment at sea in Germany and Finland follow similar patterns, although in Finland women could also be found providing cleaning and cooking services for the crew. Sundqvist, 'Kvinnor ombord', p. 505.
- 9 Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work, 1700 to the Present* (London, 1998), pp. 239–40.
- 10 I have recorded all the available crew lists and agreements of Cunard ships which matched the English and Welsh census returns (years ending with a 1) between 1861 and 1938. Overall, the database includes details of 13,541 seafarers and 915 records of the trips they made. These crew agreements are deposited in several archives, including the National Maritime Museum (NMM), the Maritime History Archive of the Memorial University of Newfoundland, St John's, the Public Record Office (PRO), Liverpool Record Office (LRO) and Southampton Record Office. Hereafter referred to as 'Dataset 1861–1938'.
- 11 The most relevant to be mentioned here are the accounts of those women who worked on the steam liners. See, for example, Violet Jessop, *Titanic Survivor: the Memoirs of Violet Jessop, Stewardess*, ed. John Maxtone-Graham (Stroud, 1998); Maida Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess* (London, 1954); Dorothy Scobie, *The Stewardess rings a Bell* (Bolton, 1990); Merseyside Maritime Museum, the Maritime Archives and Library (MMM), DX/1086, Diary of Janet Sharpe, a lady's maid (passenger) on board the SS *Umbria* in 1896, and DX/1166, Diary of Stewardess Rose Stott on board *Samaria* in 1923.

- 12 Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work*, p. 42.
- 13 Sundqvist, 'Kvinnor ombord', p. 490.
- 14 Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, p. 137.
- 15 Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: a Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Padstow, 1989), pp. 8–9.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 17 Elizabeth Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840–1940* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 3.
- 18 Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, 'Women's work, gender conflict, and labour markets in Europe, 1500–1900', *Economic History Review* 44 (1991), 608–28, cited in Bridget Hill, 'Women's history: a study in change or standing still?' in Pamela Sharpe (ed.), *Women's Work: the English Experience, 1650–1914* (1998), p. 51.
- 19 Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work*, pp. 188–9.
- 20 *Reports with regard to Accommodation*, British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), 1881, LXXXII, q. 136, evidence of Charles McIver, Cunard Line, appendix C.
- 21 *Reports with regard to Accommodation*, Captain Wilson's report on questions raised in Miss C. G. O'Brien's foregoing memorandum, p. 74; report by the Assistant Secretary, Thomas Gray, Marine Department, to the President of the Board of Trade.
- 22 *Reports with regard to Accommodation*, qq. 311–15, 346, Mr James Dewar's, White Star Line, and Purser C. J. Wahler's (of *Germanic*) description of a matron's and stewardesses' duties in the steerage; 'Emigrant Accommodation on Board Atlantic Steamers: Inquiry held before Mr Thomas Gray, Assistant Secretary to the Board of Trade'.
- 23 Roberts, *Women's Work, 1840–1940*, p. 7.
- 24 Cunard usually advertised that its ships carried a surgeon and a stewardess.
- 25 University of Liverpool (UL), Cunard Archives, in Special Archives and Collections (CA), PR 4/11, Rules to be observed in the company's service (1885).
- 26 UL, CA. D302/7/1, letter from Charles McIver to F. A. Hamilton, 2 July 1853.
- 27 UL, CA. PR3/21/1–2, general information on Cunard ships.
- 28 Even if there are serious problems in using the census data for counting seafarers, it illustrates, on one hand, the general trend towards a growing percentage of catering personnel and, on the other hand, the stagnant number of women at sea. The decennial censuses covered only those who were at home, in port or in home waters on the census night, and in addition the enumeration criteria varied over time. Therefore the census figures should be taken as relative rather than absolute.
- 29 Dataset 1861–1938.
- 30 Censuses of England and Wales, 1861–1931, occupational tables.
- 31 Frank Bullen, *Men of the Merchant Service* (Stanfordville, 1900), p. 190.
- 32 'The stewardess nurse', reprint from *Queen* magazine in Prior Rupert, *Ocean Liners: the Golden Years* (1993), p. 87.
- 33 Bond, *The Ship Steward's Handbook* (Glasgow, 1918), p. 329.
- 34 Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, p. 18.
- 35 MMM, DX 1560/3/1, voyage accounts of Anne Smith, a stewardess with Cunard, diary on board *Carinthia* in November 1927.
- 36 Bond, *The Ship Steward's Handbook* p. 329; Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, p. 16.
- 37 UL, CA, PR14/11, Rules to be observed in the company's service (1885); also Richard Bond highlights that taking care of the linen was one of the stewardesses' main duties. Bond, *The Ship Steward's Handbook*, p. 329.
- 38 Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Reprinted Pieces, etc.* (1890), p. 13.
- 39 'Rules and regulations', *Official Guide and Album of the Cunard Steamship Company* (1877), pp. 42–3.
- 40 MMM, DX 1560/3/1, voyage accounts of Anne Smith, a stewardess with Cunard, diary written on *Carinthia* on Mediterranean cruise, 6 and 11 January 1927.
- 41 UL, CA, GM2/1–2, memorandum to pursers, 19 February 1931, Rates for special stewardesses.
- 42 UL, CA, D24/C2/259, applications for employment, 1922–26, letter from the General Manager, T. Royden, to Lord Lawrence, 18 July 1927.
- 43 'Female labour at sea', *Sea Breezes*, new series, 11 (July–December 1946), 258–9.
- 44 See, for example, Sonya O. Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth Century England* (1992), especially chapter 6, pp. 126–53; Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 77–8.
- 45 Catherine Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work: Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment* (1996), p. 170; An Act for the Regulation of Agricultural Gangs, 1867, 30 and 31 Vic.

- 46 Mines Act, 1842, 5 and 6 Vic. xcix; Joanna Bourke, *Working-class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (1994), p. 124; John Benson, *British Coal Miners in the Nineteenth Century: a Social History* (New York, 1980), p. 31.
- 47 Meta Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the girls: the expansion of clerical work for women, 1850–1914', in Angela John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England, 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1986), p. 160.
- 48 UL, CA, GM9/6/9, Laundry and bottling establishments.
- 49 Dataset 1861–1938.
- 50 Nelson French, 'The purser's tale of women at sea', *Sea Breezes* 11 (1989), 769.
- 51 Zimmeck, 'Jobs for the girls', p. 161.
- 52 Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, pp. 49–52. However, there is no evidence as to how the rules regarding women workers varied between individual companies.
- 53 NMM, P&O/10/10, Instructions to pursers and clerks in charge on board the steamships of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (1860).
- 54 UL, CA, PR14/11–20, Rules to be observed in the company's service, 1885, 1897 and 1913 editions.
- 55 UL, CA, C2/154, memorandum from the General Manager to the Lady Superintendent regarding Lady Thurlow's letter to the company, which complained about stewardesses' accommodation on board Atlantic liners, 6 December 1922.
- 56 Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, p. 61.
- 57 NMM, P&O/77/15, Stewards' register, 1901.
- 58 NMM, P&O/77/19, Stewards' register, 1911.
- 59 Fingard, *Jack in Port*, pp. 57–59.
- 60 Jo Stanley, *Women at Sea: some Experiences of Canadian Pacific Stewardesses sailing out of Liverpool in the Inter-war Years* (Liverpool, 1987), p. 7.
- 61 NMM, BIS 30/38, letter of recommendation from Clara Ward to the Superintendent of British India Steam Navigation Company, 10 October 1925; Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, p. 12.
- 62 UL, CA, C2/259, letter from Mr Royden to a commander who had enquired about a stenographer's position for his daughter, 17 January 1927.
- 63 Stanley, 'Finding a brief flowering of typists at sea', p. 34.
- 64 Nixon, *Ring twice for the Stewardess*, p. 11.
- 65 UL, CA, PR5/3, 'Mothers of the sea', *Cunard Magazine* 6, 4 (1921), 134.
- 66 French, 'The purser's tale of women at sea', p. 769.
- 67 The required age for Cunard remained twenty-five for women at least until 1938. Scobie, *The Stewardess rings a Bell*, p. 5.
- 68 UL, CA, C2/264, correspondence regarding staff, letter from Sir Thomas Royden, Chairman of Cunard, to Mr Bearsted, 21 January 1928.
- 69 Stanley, *Women at Sea*, p. 7.
- 70 'The stewardess nurse', reprinted from *Queen* magazine in Prior Rupert, *Ocean Liners: the Golden Years* (1993), p. 87.
- 71 UL, CA, C2/259, letter from L.R. to the chairman, dated 17 June 1927, 'Applications for employment, 1922–1926'.
- 72 Liverpool Record Office (LRO), Census 1881, Shipping schedules of Liverpool, No. 3604.
- 73 NMM, P&O 77/12, 77/15, 77/19, Stewards' registers, 1891–94, 1899–1901 and 1909–11.
- 74 UL, CA, C2/259, applications for employment. A letter for Mr Royden, a chairman of Cunard, from someone recommending a nurse, described her: 'She is a very nice girl – tall and very good-looking, and also a capable nurse.' Valerie Burton emphasises that smart appearance was the most important factor in the recruitment of stewards (1989, p. 145).
- 75 Jessop, *Titanic Survivor*, pp. 52–3, 58.
- 76 Scobie, *The Stewardess rings a Bell*, p. 7.
- 77 Jessop, *Titanic Survivor*, p. 53.
- 78 NMM, P&O 77/23, Stewards' register, 1920–24. The sample comprised all the stewardesses (forty-three cases) registered in 1921.
- 79 NMM, P&O 77/26, Stewards' register, 1929–32. The sample comprised all the stewardesses (forty-three cases) registered in 1931.

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