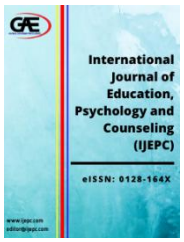
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"I'M TRYING MY BEST TO FIT IN": SOCIAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ADAPTATION FROM A MUSLIM FEMALE CHIEF ENGINEER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This study explored the social and behavioural adaptation experienced by a Female Chief Engineer working in a male-dominated maritime environment. Using a qualitative single-case study approach, the study examined the participant's workplace challenges, behavioural survival strategies, leadership experiences, and career persistence throughout her maritime journey. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed

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that the participant experienced various challenges involving physical exhaustion, psychological pressure, operational anxiety, gender scepticism, interpersonal conflict, and workplace resistance. The study found that adaptation within maritime environments extended beyond technical competency, involving continuous emotional regulation, behavioural negotiation, and workplace survival strategies. Despite repeatedly experiencing exhaustion and thoughts of resignation, the participant continued progressing within the maritime industry through persistence, professionalism, behavioural adaptation, and interpersonal adjustment. The findings also showed that emotional attachment toward maritime life became an important factor contributing to the participant's long-term career persistence. Rather than leaving the industry, the participant gradually transformed workplace scepticism into professional recognition through continuous adaptation and leadership development. The study argues that women's career sustainability and progression in maritime leadership positions are not solely determined by technical capability, but also by the interaction of behavioural adaptation, emotional endurance, interpersonal adjustment, occupational commitment, and psychospiritual coping within masculine occupational cultures. Overall, this study contributes to Social and Behavioural Studies by providing deeper understanding of the behavioural and emotional realities experienced by women working in high-risk maritime professions.

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Keyword:

Behavioural Adaptation, Career Survival, Maritime Industry, Psychospiritual Resilience, Women Seafarers

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Introduction

Despite global efforts to increase women's participation across various industries, the presence of women in maritime engineering and shipboard leadership positions remains relatively limited. Women working at sea are often required to navigate not only operational and technical responsibilities, but also complex workplace cultures shaped by masculine norms, hierarchical structures, and challenging interpersonal dynamics. As a result, women seafarers frequently experience difficulties related to acceptance, trust, communication, and professional recognition within maritime workplaces (Karunatilleke et al., 2024).

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the social and behavioural experiences of women in high-risk professions. However, many discussions surrounding women in maritime sectors continue to focus primarily on recruitment, gender equality policies, or workforce participation statistics (Emad et al., 2025; Karunatilleke et al., 2024; Yıldırım et al., 2025). Less attention, however, has been given to how women experience and adapt

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behaviourally to life at sea, particularly in leadership positions that require authority, emotional control, and social negotiation. This issue becomes even more significant when women occupy senior technical roles such as Chief Engineer, where they are expected to lead crews, make critical decisions, and simultaneously survive within workplace cultures that may still question female competence and authority (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Jensen et al., 2023).

The phrase “I’m trying my best to fit in” reflects a deeper psychological and social reality experienced by many women working in masculine occupational environments. Fitting in involves more than adjusting to the technical demands of the job. It also requires behavioural adaptation, emotional regulation, identity negotiation, and efforts to gain social acceptance. In maritime settings, women may feel pressured to constantly prove their capability, maintain professional boundaries, regulate their emotions, and carefully manage workplace relationships in order to avoid conflict, discrimination, or social isolation (Grimett, 2024; Karunatilleke et al., 2024; Şenbursa, 2025).

From a female Chief Engineer perspective, the process of adaptation becomes even more complex due to leadership expectations and gendered workplace perceptions. Female leaders at sea may encounter skepticism from subordinates, resistance from senior crew members, or assumptions regarding their physical and emotional capabilities (Emad et al., 2025; Cordon, 2020; Grimett, 2024). At the same time, they are expected to maintain authority, ensure operational safety, and preserve team cohesion within confined and high-pressure environments. Such realities position female maritime leadership as an important area of inquiry, particularly in understanding how individuals negotiate identity, resilience, workplace behaviour, and interpersonal relationships in male-dominated professional settings.

In addition, women working in high-risk maritime environments may also rely on spiritual and religious coping mechanisms to regulate emotional stress, maintain psychological endurance, and preserve personal identity within challenging occupational settings. For Muslim women seafarers, religious practices and spiritual self-regulation may function as important internal resources in navigating workplace pressure, emotional exhaustion, and social adaptation at sea (Shukor et al., 2025). These internal beliefs and practices may remain largely private within the shipboard environment, requiring women to balance personal piety with prevailing workplace norms (Sampson et al., 2024). Such internal coping mechanisms may help female maritime leaders develop the psychological resilience needed to manage exclusion and the tension between personal identity and the demands of isolated, hierarchical shipboard environments (Bridges et al., 2021).

Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes previous studies concerning women’s experiences in male-dominated maritime workplaces, with particular attention to social, behavioural, and psychospiritual dimensions. Rather than viewing workplace adaptation solely as an occupational response to technical demands, the literature indicates that women seafarers must simultaneously negotiate gender expectations, interpersonal relationships, emotional pressures, and professional identities. The following discussion therefore examines how these interconnected dimensions shape women’s adaptation and persistence within maritime environments.

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Women in Male-Dominated Maritime Workplace

The maritime industry remains a strongly male-dominated occupational environment, particularly within technical and leadership positions, despite the gradual increase in women's participation (Emad et al., 2025). Existing studies consistently indicate that the challenges experienced by women seafarers extend beyond numerical underrepresentation. Rather, women often enter workplace cultures in which professional competence, physical endurance, and leadership authority have historically been associated with masculine norms (Kitada, 2022; Cordon, 2020; Karunatilleke et al., 2024). Consequently, women may be positioned as occupational outsiders and required to establish their professional legitimacy within environments where male competence is more readily assumed.

Across the literature, gender stereotypes appear as a recurring mechanism shaping women's workplace experiences. Studies have reported assumptions that female seafarers are physically weaker, emotionally vulnerable, or less capable of managing operational pressure than their male counterparts (Cordon, 2020; Karunatilleke et al., 2024). These perceptions may influence workplace interactions, communication patterns, task allocation, leadership opportunities, and the extent to which women's authority is accepted onboard (Arulnayagam, 2020; Cordon, 2020; Şenbursa, 2025). Such pressures may be particularly significant within marine engineering, where physical demands, heavy machinery, operational risk, and hierarchical decision-making can reinforce masculine expectations regarding occupational competence (Emad et al., 2025; Arulnayagam, 2020; Grimett, 2024). Overall, these studies suggest that women's professional performance may be judged not only on technical competence but also against gendered expectations of how a maritime professional should behave and perform.

However, the challenges identified in previous research are not exclusively professional or technical. Shipboard environments combine workplaces and living spaces, involving confined conditions, prolonged interpersonal contact, hierarchical relationships, and limited privacy (Sampson, 2020; Suresh & Krithika, 2024). Within these conditions, women may need to regulate their communication, emotional responses, interpersonal boundaries, and social behaviour to maintain professional relationships and minimise misunderstanding or unwanted attention. This process becomes more complex in multicultural crews, where gender expectations intersect with differences in nationality, culture, religion, and communication practices (Kitada, 2013). Thus, "fitting in" within maritime workplaces can be understood as an ongoing process of social and behavioural negotiation rather than merely adjustment to technical job demands.

Existing research further suggests that women respond to these pressures through various strategies, including emotional control, conflict avoidance, relationship-building, consistent work performance, and collaborative leadership (Arulnayagam, 2020; Bridges et al., 2021; Grimett, 2024). These strategies suggest that workplace acceptance may develop gradually through everyday behaviour and interpersonal relationships, rather than through formal rank or professional qualifications alone. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has concentrated on identifying gender barriers, discrimination, workplace inequalities, and general coping experiences. Less attention has been given to how these processes unfold within the career trajectory of a woman who has progressed into senior technical leadership. The experience of a female Chief Engineer can therefore provide insight into how gendered workplace challenges, behavioural adaptation, leadership practices, and professional acceptance interact within a male-dominated maritime environment.

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Social and Behavioural Adaptation in High-Risk Occupational Settings

Social and behavioural adaptation broadly involves adjustments in attitudes, behaviours, emotional responses, and interpersonal interactions in response to environmental demands and social expectations (Holt, 2025; Xi et al., 2020). Across studies of high-risk occupations, adaptation emerges as particularly important because employees must function under combinations of physical pressure, psychological stress, organisational hierarchy, and unpredictable working conditions (Ćosić et al., 2025; Gagnon & Monties, 2022; Koval & Pidluzhna, 2025). The literature therefore suggests that effective adaptation in high-risk professions extends beyond technical competency and involves behavioural and emotional capacities that enable individuals to continue functioning under demanding conditions.

A recurring theme across this literature is emotional regulation. Individuals working in stressful occupational environments are expected to control their reactions, manage emotional pressure, and maintain professional behaviour despite fatigue, uncertainty, or interpersonal conflict (Brooks & Greenberg, 2022; Turgo, 2024). Emotional regulation is therefore closely connected to behavioural adaptation because individuals must continually adjust how they respond to situations according to occupational and social expectations (Kim et al., 2024). Coping strategies such as maintaining positive relationships, prioritising task completion, avoiding unnecessary conflict, practising patience, and engaging in personal or spiritual activities may consequently serve both psychological and behavioural functions.

These adaptive demands become particularly complex within maritime workplaces because occupational risk occurs alongside prolonged social interaction. Maritime crews commonly consist of individuals from different national, cultural, and religious backgrounds, requiring continuous adjustment to different communication patterns, behavioural expectations, and social norms (Gekara & Sampson, 2020; Mantuhac et al., 2020). For women seafarers, such adaptation may involve an additional negotiation between professional assertiveness and social acceptance, particularly where concerns regarding gender, personal boundaries, safety, and professional respect are present (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Social adaptation in this context is therefore not separate from occupational performance; rather, the ability to manage interpersonal relationships may directly influence an individual's capacity to function and persist within the workplace.

Existing studies therefore identify emotional regulation, coping, interpersonal adjustment, and behavioural flexibility as important aspects of adaptation in high-risk occupational environments. However, these dimensions are often examined separately or discussed as general coping responses. Less attention has been directed towards how they operate collectively within the lived career experience of a woman occupying a senior technical position in the maritime industry. Understanding this interaction is particularly important because a female Chief Engineer must negotiate not only the physical and operational demands of maritime work, but also leadership authority, gender expectations, interpersonal relationships, and continued professional acceptance.

Islamic Psychospiritual Coping

Alongside social and behavioural strategies, existing research indicates that religious and spiritual practices may provide important internal resources for managing occupational stress and emotional pressure. Studies concerning Islamic psychospiritual coping have associated

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religious practices with psychological calmness, emotional regulation, resilience, and behavioural stability, particularly during stressful circumstances (Almaryami et al., 2025; Fatimah et al., 2023; Ozcan et al., 2021). Practices such as prayer, Quran recitation, emotional reflection, and reliance on religious values may therefore contribute to an individual's capacity to regulate emotional responses and sustain psychological endurance (Amiruddin et al., 2025; Urooj et al., 2025).

Within demanding occupational environments, psychospiritual coping may complement behavioural and interpersonal adaptation rather than function as an isolated coping mechanism. While behavioural strategies regulate outward responses to workplace demands, spiritual practices may provide an internal means of managing fear, exhaustion, uncertainty, and emotional pressure. For Muslim women working at sea, this relationship is particularly relevant because religious identity and practices must be maintained within confined, multicultural, and predominantly male occupational environments. Psychospiritual coping may therefore contribute not only to personal wellbeing but also to the emotional stability required to maintain professional behaviour under pressure.

Despite growing recognition of religious coping in studies of occupational stress, its relationship with social and behavioural adaptation among women in maritime leadership remains comparatively underexplored. Existing maritime studies have provided important insights into gender inequality, workplace barriers, identity management, and occupational coping, while psychospiritual studies have highlighted the role of faith in emotional resilience. However, these strands of literature are rarely integrated to explain how social, behavioural, emotional, and psychospiritual mechanisms operate together within the career experience of a Muslim woman in senior maritime leadership. This gap is addressed by examining adaptation as more than the ability to endure occupational hardship. The study considers how workplace negotiation, behavioural adjustment, emotional regulation, and psychospiritual coping operate together in the participant's career experience.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative single-case study approach to explore the social and behavioural adaptation of a female Chief Engineer working within the maritime industry. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought an in-depth understanding of the participant's lived professional experiences and the subjective meanings associated with her career journey, consistent with previous qualitative research examining women's experiences within male-dominated occupational environments (Shukor et al., 2025; Martin & Barnard, 2013). The single-case design enabled an in-depth examination of this information-rich case, with emphasis on contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

The participant was purposively selected because of her extensive experience in maritime engineering, progression into a senior technical leadership position, and direct experience working within a male-dominated shipboard environment. Her professional trajectory provided a particularly relevant case for examining gender-related challenges, workplace adaptation, leadership experiences, and career persistence. Previous research has similarly demonstrated the value of examining women's individual experiences and identity negotiation to understand the complexities of working within male-dominated professional environments (Kitada, 2010; Martin & Barnard, 2013).

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Data were collected through a semi-structured interview. This method enabled the participant to narrate her personal and professional experiences in detail while allowing the researchers to explore significant issues that emerged throughout the interview. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for examining lived workplace experiences that involve gender expectations, professional identity, interpersonal relationships, and career development (Paraggua et al., 2022). The interview focused on workplace challenges, gender-related experiences, coping strategies, leadership practices, and social interactions with crew members.

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis because the study aimed to identify and interpret recurring patterns of meaning within the participant's account rather than merely present her experiences as a chronological narrative. Thematic analysis provided a systematic means of organising the extensive interview data into meaningful patterns associated with gender-related challenges and social and behavioural adaptation. This approach allowed experiences from different stages of the participant's career to be compared while retaining the context of her professional journey.

The analytical process involved repeated reading of the interview transcript to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by systematic coding of relevant segments. Codes representing similar experiences and meanings were compared and grouped into broader patterns. These patterns were subsequently reviewed and refined into themes that captured significant dimensions of the participant's workplace experiences. Through this iterative process, recurring patterns in the participant's narrative were identified and interpreted across her career experiences. Such systematic engagement with qualitative data is important for developing a coherent interpretation of participants' professional experiences (Martin & Barnard, 2013).

The use of thematic analysis was therefore not intended merely to summarise the participant's story but to establish an analytical structure through which the interaction between social, behavioural, psychological, and psychospiritual experiences could be examined. Direct quotations from the interview were retained in the presentation of findings to preserve the participant's voice and provide evidence supporting the interpretation of each theme.

Therefore, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

i. What gender-related challenges are experienced by a female Chief Engineer in a male-dominated maritime workplace?
ii. How does a female Chief Engineer sustain and progress in her maritime career despite workplace challenges?

Findings

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis conducted on the interview data obtained from the participant. The findings are divided into three main sections, namely the participant's background, Research Question 1 on gender-related workplace challenges, and Research Question 2 on career survival and adaptation strategies within the maritime industry. Overall, the thematic analysis revealed multiple social, behavioural, psychological, and psychospiritual experiences that shaped the participant's professional journey as a female Chief Engineer.

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Participant's Background

The participant selected for this study was a highly experienced female maritime professional with more than a decade of experience in the maritime engineering industry. She was selected as the sole participant due to her unique professional background, pioneering achievements, and extensive leadership experience within a male-dominated maritime environment. Her experiences were considered highly valuable and information-rich in understanding the social and behavioural adaptation of women in maritime leadership positions.

The participant began her maritime education at Akademi Laut Malaysia in 2008, where she pursued a Diploma in Marine Engineering. She belonged to one of the earliest groups of women entering the field of maritime engineering and was part of the third female batch in the program. During the early stage of her career, she experienced scepticism regarding women's capabilities in handling technical and operational shipboard responsibilities. Nevertheless, she demonstrated strong determination, technical competence, and resilience throughout her professional journey.

Her career progression in the maritime industry was both rapid and remarkable. She began her shipboard career as a Fifth Engineer before being promoted to Third Engineer within approximately one year. She later advanced to the position of Second Engineer in 2016 before eventually achieving the role of Chief Engineer. Her appointment as Chief Engineer represented a significant milestone due to the limited presence of women in senior maritime engineering leadership positions. Despite initial doubts from management regarding her ability to lead crews and manage shipboard operations as a woman, she successfully proved her competence through professionalism, technical expertise, and adaptive leadership practices.

In 2012, the participant also became one of the earliest women to enter the offshore maritime sector, further strengthening her professional reputation within the industry. Throughout her career, she became known for her collaborative leadership approach, professional discipline, and ability to establish appropriate interpersonal boundaries within shipboard environments. Her experience working with multicultural crews and navigating complex workplace dynamics provided rich insights into behavioural adaptation and workplace survival strategies in masculine occupational settings.

One of her most notable achievements was receiving international professional recognition in the maritime inspection field, reflecting her high level of technical expertise and leadership capability within the global maritime industry. Due to her pioneering experience, long-term involvement in maritime engineering, and leadership background, the participant was considered an appropriate and credible respondent for this study. Her experiences offered valuable insights into gender-related workplace challenges, behavioural adaptation, leadership negotiation, and survival strategies among women working in male-dominated maritime environments.

Research Question 1: What gender-related challenges are experienced by a female Chief Engineer in a male-dominated maritime workplace?

This section presents the findings related to the workplace challenges experienced by the participant as a Female Chief Engineer in a male-dominated maritime environment. Four major themes emerged from the findings: (1) Physical and Psychological Exhaustion, (2) Continuous

Operational Anxiety and Hyper-Alertness, (3) Gender Scepticism and Workplace Resistance, and (4) Human Interaction Pressure and Workplace Survival.

Physical and Psychological Exhaustion

This section presents the findings related to the workplace challenges experienced by the participant as a Female Chief Engineer in a male-dominated maritime environment. Four major themes emerged from the findings: (1) Physical and Psychological Exhaustion, (2) Continuous Operational Anxiety and Hyper-Alertness, (3) Gender Scepticism and Workplace Resistance, and (4) Human Interaction Pressure and Workplace Survival.

One of the major challenges experienced by the participant involved extreme physical exhaustion and psychological fatigue throughout her maritime education and professional career.

The participant explained:

> "At night they called us to roll here and there, people vomiting everywhere, jumping from the ship…"
>
> "We were too tired to even think about it… in the middle of sleeping, we were awakened again…"

The participant also described the long-term impact of sleep deprivation during her maritime career: "Sometimes I only slept three to four hours a day." (01:09:15)

Continuous Operational Anxiety and Hyper-Alertness

Another important challenge experienced by the participant involved continuous operational anxiety and hyper-alertness regarding shipboard responsibilities.

The participant stated:

> "Sometimes I woke up at 2 a.m. and went downstairs to check the engine room."
>
> "It's not that I didn't trust them, but I kept thinking, 'Did they really check it properly?'"

The long-term psychological effect of working in such an environment was also evident when she stated: "Even until now, whenever my phone rings, I immediately feel anxious."

Gender Scepticism and Workplace Resistance

The findings also revealed that the participant experienced scepticism and resistance from male colleagues due to her gender. She described one incident where a male engineer openly rejected the idea of working with her: "If within one week he could not work with me, he would return home."

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She also experienced criticism regarding her contribution and professional role onboard: "They said I received a high salary but did not work."

The participant further admitted difficulty in exercising authority over older male crew members: "I was not good at giving direct orders."

Human Interaction Pressure and Workplace Survival

Apart from technical and operational responsibilities, the participant also identified interpersonal relationships and workplace interaction as major challenges throughout her maritime career. The participant stated: "The most challenging part was when we had a superior who did not want to work together with us."

She also acknowledged the existence of revenge and physical conflict risks within maritime workplaces: "Revenge can happen too."

Additionally, communication barriers further complicated workplace interactions: "Language was another challenge."

Overall, the findings for RQ1 demonstrate that the challenges experienced by the participant were multidimensional and interconnected. Her experiences were not limited to the physical and operational demands of maritime work, but also involved continuous psychological pressure, gender-based scepticism, and complex interpersonal relationships. Physical exhaustion and operational hyper-alertness increased the emotional demands of her work, while resistance from male colleagues required her to continuously establish her professional credibility and authority. These findings indicate that the challenges faced by a female Chief Engineer within a male-dominated maritime environment involve an interaction between occupational demands, psychological pressure, gender dynamics, and workplace relationships.

Research Question 2: How does a female Chief Engineer sustain and progress in her maritime career despite workplace challenges?

The findings revealed that the participant's adaptation within the maritime workplace was strongly influenced by emotional endurance, behavioural adjustment, workplace relationship management, psychospiritual coping, and a strong sense of belonging to maritime life. Five major themes emerged from the findings: (1) Persistence Despite Emotional and Physical Pressure, (2) Behavioural Adaptation to Gain Workplace Acceptance, (3) Emotional Attachment and Sense of Belonging to Maritime Life, (4) Career Achievement Through Continuous Adaptation, and (5) Psychospiritual Coping and Emotional Regulation.

Persistence Despite Emotional and Physical Pressure

One important finding revealed that the participant continuously experienced emotional and physical exhaustion throughout her maritime career.

The participant stated:

> "I still kept thinking that I wanted to quit."

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> "Honestly, I really could not handle it anymore."

However, despite these feelings, she continued accepting opportunities for career progression: "They wanted to promote me, so I accepted going back as a Third Engineer."

Behavioural Adaptation to Gain Workplace Acceptance

The findings also revealed that the participant survived within the maritime workplace by adopting adaptive behavioural strategies when facing resistance from male colleagues.

The participant explained:

> "I told him to give me one or two days first to familiarize myself with everything on the ship."
>
> "After about two days… he became good with me."

The participant additionally described how the relationship improved over time: "We could even eat together at the same table."

Emotional Attachment and Sense of Belonging to Maritime Life

Another important finding revealed that despite experiencing continuous pressure and challenges, the participant developed a strong emotional attachment toward maritime life.

The participant stated:

> "I cannot say I am unhappy, but…"
> "My soul belongs to the ship and the sea."
> "I already feel comfortable there. I actually feel calmer."

Career Achievement Through Continuous Adaptation

The findings further revealed that the participant's long-term persistence and adaptation eventually resulted in significant professional achievement and international recognition within the maritime industry.

The participant explained:

> "Now it has officially been recognized by OCIMF…"
> "They recognized me as the first female OB Inspector in the world."

The participant's willingness to continue accepting professional responsibilities despite previous exhaustion also reflected her commitment toward long-term career growth: "They wanted to promote me, so I accepted going back as a Third Engineer."

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Psychospiritual Coping and Emotional Regulation

Another important finding revealed that the participant relied on psychospiritual coping mechanisms to manage emotional pressure, fear, and psychological exhaustion throughout her maritime career.

The participant explained:

> "Sometimes when I feel disturbed or afraid, I read Quranic verses to calm myself."
> "I read the verses repeatedly until I feel calmer."

Overall, the findings for RQ2 demonstrate that the participant's ability to sustain and progress in her maritime career was supported by multiple interconnected forms of adaptation. Persistence enabled her to continue despite repeated emotional and physical pressure, while behavioural adjustment and relationship management helped her gradually gain workplace acceptance. Her growing sense of belonging to maritime life further strengthened her commitment to remain in the profession, while psychospiritual coping provided an internal mechanism for regulating fear, emotional pressure, and psychological exhaustion. Over time, these adaptive processes contributed to her continued career progression and professional recognition. Her career sustainability therefore appeared to depend on a combination of behavioural adaptation, emotional endurance, interpersonal adjustment, psychospiritual coping, and occupational commitment. Table 1 summarises the themes that emerged from the thematic analysis according to the two research questions.

Table 1: Summary of Themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis

Research Question	Themes
RQ1: Gender-related challenges	1. Physical and Psychological Exhaustion 2. Continuous Operational Anxiety and Hyper-Alertness 3. Gender Scepticism and Workplace Resistance 4. Human Interaction Pressure and Workplace Survival
RQ2: Career sustainability and progression	1. Persistence Despite Emotional and Physical Pressure 2. Behavioural Adaptation to Gain Workplace Acceptance 3. Emotional Attachment and Sense of Belonging to Maritime Life 4. Career Achievement Through Continuous Adaptation 5. Psychospiritual Coping and Emotional Regulation

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the experiences of a female Chief Engineer in a male-dominated maritime environment cannot be understood solely in terms of technical competence or occupational demands. Instead, her career trajectory reflects the interaction between gendered workplace expectations, psychological pressure, interpersonal negotiation, behavioural adaptation, and psychospiritual coping. This supports previous research showing that women seafarers operate within occupational cultures shaped by masculine norms and gendered expectations (Emad et al., 2025; Karunatilleke et al., 2024). The findings add to this literature by showing that these pressures may persist even after a woman progresses into a senior technical leadership position. Professional advancement, therefore, does not necessarily

eliminate gender-related challenges; rather, it may require continued negotiation of authority, acceptance, and professional legitimacy.

Physical and psychological exhaustion emerged as interconnected occupational pressures rather than independent challenges. Maritime work is already recognised as physically demanding and psychologically stressful due to long working hours, operational risks, and demanding shipboard conditions (Arulnayagam, 2020; Gekara & Sampson, 2020). The present findings suggest, however, that endurance may also carry a gendered dimension. Within a masculine occupational culture, the capacity to tolerate exhaustion and maintain emotional control may function as an informal marker of professional legitimacy. For women, this creates an additional pressure to demonstrate that physical or emotional difficulty does not indicate professional inadequacy. This interpretation is consistent with research suggesting that women in male-dominated professions frequently encounter expectations to demonstrate their competence repeatedly in order to counter gender-based assumptions (Williams et al., 2025). Endurance may therefore serve two purposes: coping with demanding working conditions and demonstrating occupational credibility.

Operational anxiety and hyper-alertness further illustrate how senior maritime responsibility can extend beyond formal working tasks into sustained psychological engagement. Previous studies have associated maritime occupations with considerable stress and psychological demands (Peña & Bretones, 2025), while research on maritime leadership highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and psychological resilience among ship crews (Lupu, 2025). The findings suggest that leadership responsibility may become psychologically internalised, with concerns about operational safety continuing beyond scheduled working hours. Such internalisation may strengthen vigilance and professional accountability, but prolonged hyper-alertness may simultaneously increase emotional strain. This indicates that career progression into senior maritime leadership may bring not only greater professional authority but also a deeper psychological burden of responsibility.

Gender scepticism represents another significant dimension of this professional burden. Previous studies have documented stereotypes portraying women seafarers as physically weaker, emotionally vulnerable, or less suited to demanding maritime responsibilities (Cordon, 2020; Karunatilleke et al., 2024). The present study demonstrates that such assumptions may persist even after women acquire substantial experience and progress into leadership positions. This supports Heilman et al. (2023), who argue that gender stereotypes can continue to shape evaluations of women's competence and leadership. Formal qualifications and occupational rank therefore do not automatically translate into social legitimacy. Women may continue to face a greater burden of proving that they deserve the authority attached to their position. This reflects the broader "tightrope" identified in male-dominated environments, in which women must demonstrate authority while simultaneously managing expectations regarding how that authority should be expressed (Shellock et al., 2022). In response to these pressures, behavioural adaptation appears to be one way of gaining professional acceptance.

Existing research has shown that women in male-dominated occupations may modify aspects of their workplace behaviour in response to dominant occupational expectations (Acejo & Abila, 2016). In the present study, adaptation did not simply involve conformity to masculine workplace norms. Rather, it involved balancing professional authority with patience, emotional control, collaborative communication, and interpersonal adjustment. This suggests that adaptation should not always be viewed as passive accommodation. In this case, it allowed the

participant to manage resistance while maintaining working relationships and professional effectiveness. Behavioural adaptation can therefore be viewed as a form of agency, as the participant adjusted how she communicated authority without giving up the authority of her professional role.

This interpretation also highlights the importance of interpersonal competence in maritime career sustainability. Confined shipboard environments require crew members to live and work together for prolonged periods, making social relationships inseparable from occupational functioning (Lupu, 2025; Wijk, 2023). Technical competence may establish formal professional credibility, but the ability to manage disagreement, communication barriers, interpersonal boundaries, and workplace tension may determine whether that credibility can be sustained within everyday shipboard interactions. For a woman occupying a leadership position, interpersonal adjustment may therefore serve two functions simultaneously: maintaining operational cooperation and negotiating social acceptance. In this case, career survival in maritime leadership depended on both technical expertise and the ability to manage workplace relationships.

An important contribution of this study concerns the participant's continued career persistence despite repeated occupational and interpersonal pressures. Existing research often frames persistence in male-dominated professions in relation to resilience or the ability to withstand workplace barriers (Bridges et al., 2021). The participant's experience, however, points to a more complex process. Persistence was supported not only by endurance but also by behavioural adaptation, interpersonal adjustment, professional progression, and an increasing sense of belonging to maritime life. The participant's emotional connection with the sea indicates that occupational identity may become an important source of career continuity. This is consistent with research demonstrating the significance of seafarers' sense of place and occupational attachment (Markkula, 2025; Turgo, 2024). Career persistence may therefore be linked not only to resilience but also to the extent to which maritime work becomes part of a seafarer's professional and personal identity.

Psychospiritual coping adds another dimension to this process. Previous studies have demonstrated that faith and spirituality can function as psychological coping resources during stressful circumstances (Ozcan et al., 2021; Fatimah et al., 2023). Within the present case, Islamic psychospiritual practices appeared to provide an internal mechanism for regulating fear, emotional pressure, and psychological exhaustion. From an Islamic perspective, such regulation is consistent with the emphasis on spiritual remembrance as a source of inner tranquillity, as reflected in Surah al-Ra 'd (13:28): "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest." Rather than functioning independently from workplace adaptation, psychospiritual coping appears to complement behavioural and interpersonal strategies by strengthening the internal emotional stability required to respond constructively to external pressures.

This relationship between internal and external adaptation is particularly significant in the context of Muslim women working within multicultural maritime environments. Sampson et al. (2024) demonstrate that religious differences aboard vessels require ongoing negotiation within shipboard social life. The present study suggests that religious coping can also operate within a more private psychological space, enabling the participant to maintain emotional stability while continuing to function within prevailing occupational norms. Psychospiritual resilience may therefore provide an internal resource that helps the participant regulate her

responses to workplace pressures. This extends existing discussions of women's maritime adaptation by demonstrating that professional survival may involve not only social and behavioural negotiation but also internal spiritual resources that are less visible within everyday workplace interactions.

Overall, the participant's career progression was shaped by more than technical competence or individual resilience. It involved behavioural adjustment, interpersonal competence, occupational commitment, and psychospiritual coping. Gender scepticism and occupational pressure create continuing demands for professional legitimacy, while behavioural adjustment and interpersonal competence enable workplace acceptance to be gradually negotiated. Emotional attachment to maritime life strengthens occupational commitment, whereas psychospiritual coping provides an internal resource for emotional regulation and endurance. Over time, these processes can interact with technical competence and professional performance to transform workplace scepticism into professional recognition.

Theoretically, this study therefore extends the understanding of adaptation in male-dominated maritime workplaces by positioning adaptation as an interaction between external negotiation and internal regulation. External negotiation involves behavioural adjustment, interpersonal relationship management, professional performance, and the negotiation of gendered authority, while internal regulation involves emotional endurance, occupational identification, and psychospiritual coping. Viewed in this way, "fitting in" does not necessarily mean passive assimilation into masculine workplace culture. Rather, it represents a continuous process through which a woman strategically negotiates workplace expectations while maintaining professional authority, occupational commitment, and personal sources of resilience. This multidimensional interpretation provides a more integrated explanation of how women may not only survive but also sustain and progress in senior maritime careers.

Conclusion

This study explored the gender-related challenges, career sustainability, and adaptive experiences of a female Chief Engineer within a male-dominated maritime environment. The findings demonstrate that the challenges associated with maritime leadership extend beyond technical and operational demands to include physical and psychological exhaustion, operational anxiety, gender scepticism, interpersonal pressure, and workplace resistance. Despite these challenges, the participant was able to sustain and progress in her maritime career through the interaction of behavioural adaptation, emotional endurance, interpersonal adjustment, occupational commitment, and psychospiritual coping.

The findings show that adaptation in a male-dominated maritime environment involves more than simply conforming to workplace expectations. It involves managing external workplace demands while also regulating internal emotional and psychological responses Behavioural adjustment and relationship management enabled the participant to negotiate workplace acceptance, while emotional endurance, a strong sense of belonging to maritime life, and Islamic psychospiritual coping supported her internal capacity to remain in the profession. Over time, these interconnected adaptive processes, together with professional competence and persistence, contributed to her career progression and professional recognition.

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Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of social and behavioural adaptation by conceptualising women's career sustainability in male-dominated maritime environments as an interaction between external negotiation and internal regulation. External negotiation involves behavioural adjustment, interpersonal relationship management, professional performance, and the negotiation of gendered authority, whereas internal regulation involves emotional endurance, occupational identification, and psychospiritual coping. This perspective adds to existing discussions of women's maritime experiences by showing that technical competence, gender barriers, and resilience should not be considered separately when examining career survival and progression. Their interaction is important in understanding how women adapt throughout their maritime careers.

In practical terms, increasing women's participation in the maritime industry requires more than recruitment initiatives and formal equality policies. Organisational support should also address the social and psychological conditions that influence women's ability to remain and progress within maritime careers. This may include strengthening gender-sensitive leadership practices, establishing supportive mentoring systems, promoting respectful workplace communication, providing appropriate psychological and wellbeing support, and developing organisational mechanisms that reduce gender-based scepticism and resistance toward women in technical and leadership positions. For multicultural maritime workplaces, recognising employees' religious and spiritual coping needs may also contribute to a more inclusive environment that supports psychological wellbeing without compromising professional responsibilities.

As a qualitative single-case study, the findings are context-specific and are not intended for statistical generalisation to all women seafarers. Nevertheless, the participant's career experience offers insight into how gender, behaviour, emotional regulation, workplace relationships, occupational identity, and psychospiritual coping may interact in senior maritime leadership. Future studies could examine these processes among a broader range of women seafarers across different ranks, vessel types, cultural contexts, and stages of maritime careers. Such research would further clarify how adaptive processes influence women's long-term retention, leadership development, and career progression within the maritime industry.

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