



How to be an ally:

A guide for seafarers

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The International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN) is an international not-for-profit maritime organisation which works to improve the lives of seafarers and their families with services, resources, strategies and advocacy. We support seafarers and their families around the world with our free helpline services (SeafarerHelp and YachtCrewHelp), educational resources, relief funds and humanitarian support. We also work to drive change within the maritime sector for better health and wellbeing amongst seafarers, using data from our helplines to identify areas of need and inform new projects and research.
www.iswan.org.uk



Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice has worked internationally and in the US since 2011 to engage men and boys as allies in gender equality, promote healthy manhood and prevent violence. We bring evidence to action through innovative research which in turn informs our programs and advocacy work across the world in local communities.
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Introduction

Allyship

AL-igh-ship (noun):

The quality or practice of helping or supporting other people who are part of a group that is treated badly or unfairly, although you are not yourself a member of this group.¹

One of the most important ways to practise allyship is just to listen.

Allyship means using your power, position, or privilege to uplift others.



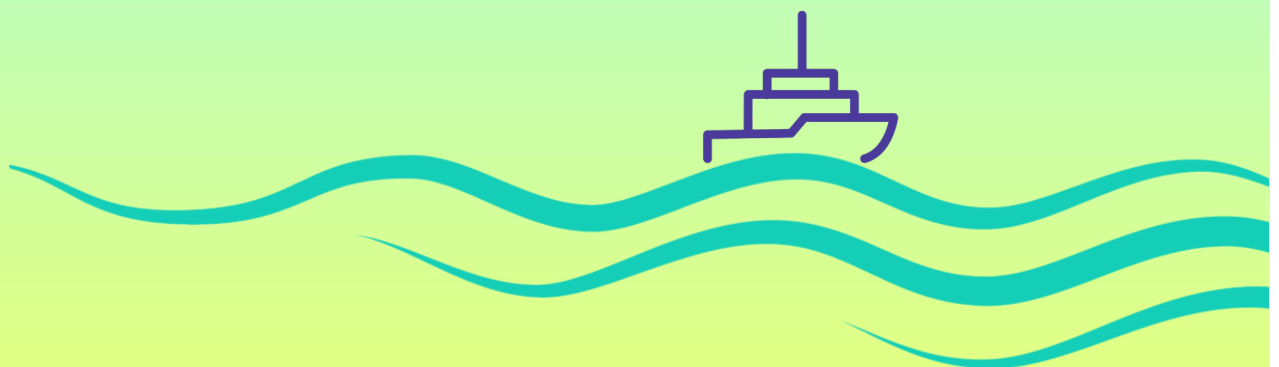
All seafarers have probably experienced feeling like “the only one” at some point in their career. The only person of your nationality, ethnicity or religion on a vessel, or the only one who speaks your language or comes from your region or city. This can feel isolating, especially at first before you get to know your crewmates and friendships are made.

Seafarers can help each other not feel like “the only one” by being allies for each other – that is, by taking actions that directly support each other, that promote fairness and equity, and that help the maritime sector to be a safe and inclusive space for everyone. One group for whom allyship can be particularly valuable is women seafarers who, especially on merchant vessels, regularly experience being the only woman on their vessel or team.

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/allyship>

More than any other group, women seafarers report experiencing harmful onboard behaviours including abuse, bullying, harassment, discrimination and violence (ABHDV) – including sexual violence. They are often treated as less knowledgeable or competent than they are, passed over or ignored for opportunities they have earned, and subjected to inappropriate remarks and attempts at humour that can leave them feeling excluded or uncomfortable. When living and working at sea, where the personal and professional are closely intertwined and you are with your co-workers for weeks or months at a time, the damaging effects of those behaviours is magnified. And for men who are used to men-only crews, it can be challenging to understand or recognise that the experiences of women colleagues may be very different from their own.

Being an ally for your crewmates is a great way to improve the onboard experience for everyone. Most of the guidance below is framed specifically in terms of how men can be allies to women, but everything here applies to any relationship or interaction between any crewmates. When speaking with women affected by these negative actions, men are encouraged to hear them out, be willing to believe them, and see if they can empathise with their experiences. When men listen closely, they may quickly see similarities to their own experiences.



Benefits of being an ally

We all need an ally sometimes, no matter who we are. There are many benefits of being an ally for you, for others and for the vessel.



Individual:

Support and solidarity. Everyone on board feels alone and isolated sometimes. Being an ally, and feeling that others are your allies, builds friendships and networks of support and makes the journey easier for everyone.

A sense of wellbeing and safety. We all work better when we trust those around us, feel physically and psychologically safe, and look out for each other.

Professional growth. Working together, teaching each other and learning from each other enables each person on the team to build skills that will help them to advance professionally. Your teammates are not your competitors and supporting each other will create opportunities for everyone.

Personal growth and satisfaction. Acting as an ally allows you to live out important values such as fairness, justice and equity. By contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society you are not just having a positive effect on your colleagues, but you can also feel a greater sense of purpose, fulfilment and accomplishment in your own life and work.



Team:

Healthy, safe and productive work environments. Having trust and good communication with and between crew members encourages a strong team and meeting or exceeding performance goals. It is also safer, as team members can speak out about concerns, mistakes and incidents without fear of negative consequences.

A culture of allyship is a culture that is supportive. Freely giving praise, feedback and even constructive and respectful criticism where appropriate creates a strong team that can learn from each other and grow together.

Diverse teams with different viewpoints are more effective teams. When you are trying to solve difficult problems, having multiple perspectives and people willing to share those perspectives – and possible solutions – can mean the difference between success and failure.



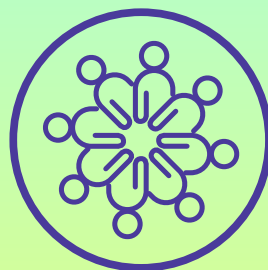
Vessel/Sector:

Improved retention and recruitment. Hundreds of men and women leave the maritime sector every year due to the harmful behaviours of some colleagues and the lack of support from others. Many more never even join the sector or stick to shore-based jobs. These damaging behaviours benefit no-one, prevent vessels from having the best crew possible and lead to the loss of good seafarers.



What you can do to be an ally: Everyone

- ☞ First and foremost, treat every colleague – including your women colleagues – like the professionals they are. Assume that they have the same skills and abilities as anyone of their rank. **Do not assume** that women cannot or will not do certain work tasks on the vessel. If you have limited experience of working with women in professional situations, simply treat them as a respected fellow seafarer. Focus on the job and your work together. If you are unsure of how to act, ask questions to understand their perspective.
- ☞ Try to understand how your own background affects the way that you relate to others. Everyone on board comes from different places, and learning how to interact with crewmates from different cultures and backgrounds is a necessary part of seafaring life. Some language, behaviour or jokes that may be appropriate or funny in one cultural context, e.g. about sensitive topics like sex, gender, religion or politics, might be unfunny or even considered offensive in another context, including on board your vessel. When you are in a new setting, take some time to figure out what is appropriate and what is not. And if you act in a way that is inadvertently offensive to others, just apologise, consider it a learning experience, and move on.
- ☞ Be aware of your own actions and how you are treating others – especially women. We all know and have worked with individuals who think they are tough and better than those around them and try to show it by belittling others. Don't be that person.
- ☞ Assign tasks and evaluate performance based on clear, relevant criteria and quality of work, not on sex or gender.



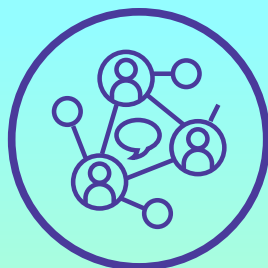
- ☞ Ensure that on-the-job training on board is available to everyone who needs it, both men and women.
- ☞ Listen to women colleagues with an open mind. Hear them out, be willing to believe them, and see if you can empathise, even if their experience is different from your own. If you listen and act in good faith it will be appreciated by all your colleagues.
- ☞ Challenge, and do not participate in, banter, gossip, or rumours that cross a line and are unkind, harmful or exclusionary. If you are uncomfortable with it, others almost certainly are as well. If you are unsure if others are bothered, just ask them.
- ☞ Speak up when you see or hear inappropriate language or behaviour. The vessel is your home and your workplace, and you have the right to push back against an environment that is bad for you, bad for the rest of the crew and bad for the vessel. Just because someone else is louder or more insistent, it does not mean that they have the right to make others unhappy or uncomfortable.
- ☞ Look out for and support each other. If you can, back each other up in reporting ABHDV behaviours. If you are unable to do that you can still always listen and offer your personal support. Having a relationship that is friendly as well as professional is both possible and beneficial for men and women.
- ☞ Be sensitive to and respectful of your crewmates' space and boundaries. Ask permission before entering someone else's office, cabin or other personal space. Pay attention to body language and other cues about when crewmates may not be open to a conversation or other social interaction.



What you can do to be an ally: Captains, Senior Officers and Heads of Department

- ☞ ABHDV behaviours are morally wrong, against company regulations, unprofessional and very damaging to the team spirit that makes the vessel run smoothly. As a leader, you are responsible for setting the tone and culture on board and ensuring all regulations are followed correctly.
- ☞ Set a positive example through your words and actions and always uphold professional standards. Do not engage in or tolerate abuse, bullying, harassment, discrimination or violence of any kind. **Whenever you see it happen, shut it down.** In your role as a leader, ask (or insist) that the person stop, then explain that they are harming their crewmates and undermining the safety and mission of the vessel. If you let harmful behaviours continue, they will erode the trust other officers and crew have in you.
- ☞ Have an open-door policy and invite other officers/heads of department and crew to be open and honest with you about their concerns regarding ABHDV behaviours in the spirit of improving the onboard experience for everyone.
- ☞ Men in leadership roles sometimes struggle to understand or recognise the experiences of women colleagues when they differ from their own. When speaking with women, hear them out, be willing to believe them and see if you can empathise, even if their experiences are different from your own.

- ☞ When you receive comments, feedback and suggestions about how someone on the crew is being treated, listen with an open mind. Receive this not as criticism but as an additional source of information to help you ensure the vessel runs as smoothly as possible. And if a member of the crew needs to report a problem higher up to owners or managers, back them up.
- ☞ Be supportive of officers and crew both professionally and personally. That does not mean you have to dig into anyone's personal life, but on board the personal and professional are intertwined far more than on land and each can affect the other. Having an awareness and understanding of how personal problems may be impacting on someone's behaviour or performance, and responding with empathy and without judgement, can have a hugely positive impact on their wellbeing and trust in your leadership.
- ☞ Offer mentoring opportunities to both men and women.
- ☞ Incorporate these messages and routes of action into daily routines and activities, e.g. group safety exercises, meetings, debriefings, introductions and other pivotal moments in onboard life.



Being an ally: What to say and how to say it

Speaking up as an ally can be challenging at first but it gets easier the more you do it. Remember to keep a positive approach: you are not trying to shame or punish someone; you are trying to educate them and improve the onboard environment. And as an ally, don't speak over or in place of the person you are trying to be an ally to; if you think what is happening is wrong, own your feelings and speak to them. If they are trying to handle it themselves just support them, don't try to take over for them. Then you can approach them later and ask what else you can do to help.



Some non-confrontational ways to be an ally include:



Direct approach:

1. Calmly ask the person to explain their words or actions. For instance: "Why would you say that Carla isn't smart enough to complete that task? She is a fully qualified engineer and has done it hundreds of times."

2. Speak from your own perspective and feelings. Use ‘I’ statements and explain how you feel about the person’s actions, how they may bother you, or why you feel they are harmful. For instance: “I would rather you not make sexual remarks about our crewmates. I think it’s inappropriate and it makes many of us uncomfortable.”

3. Speak from a perspective of friendship and begin with your concern for the person. For instance: “I know you like to joke around, but I think some of your jokes could be seen as harassment or even bullying by others. I don’t think you mean it that way, but the company is taking those things very seriously now and I don’t want you to get disciplined or lose your job. I think you should re-consider some of your language so you don’t get reprimanded.”

4. Educate the person about the possible consequences of their actions, as well as the harm they could inflict on others and even on themselves. For instance: “When you scream and shout at people, they really don’t like it, and I’m afraid some of our crew are considering quitting or transferring. I don’t want to be short-handed again like we were last year. Can you take a few minutes to cool off before you talk to someone who has made a mistake? And maybe focus on helping them improve rather than just shouting insults.”



Team up:

If you do not know the person well, if you think they may respond with hostility, or if you think they will not be convinced by just one person, recruit a second person to help you to speak with them.



Indirect approach:

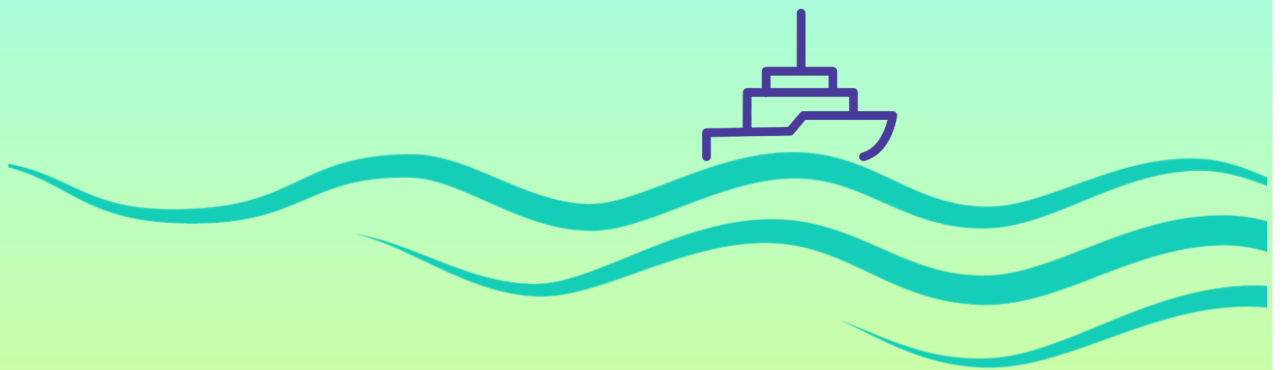
Some particularly tense or high-pressure situations are not the time or place for education, but you can interrupt to ask an unrelated question or to give information about a work-related issue to break up the problematic situation and divert attention away from those on the receiving end of harmful behaviour.



Inform an authority:

Report the incident to your manager, other senior crew or officers, the designated person ashore (DPA) or other senior shore-side management, especially if you perceive that the person being targeted might be in danger, or if the actions pose a safety hazard.

Being an ally isn't just a way to support your fellow crew members, it's a way to support yourself too. Be the kind of ally to others that you want them to be for you and collectively you can create the kind of onboard environment where everyone can be happy and truly thrive.



Further support

If you would like to talk to someone about any of the issues raised in this guidance, you can contact one of ISWAN's free, confidential, multilingual helplines – these are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and provide emotional, wellbeing and practical support:

SeafarerHelp

for seafarers and their families of any nationality:

www.iswan.org.uk/seafarerhelp

YachtCrewHelp

for yacht crew and their families of any nationality:

www.iswan.org.uk/yachtcrewhelp

ISWAN's Social Interaction Matters (SIM) Project

This is a long-term ISWAN initiative working to improve the health, safety and wellbeing of seafarers worldwide through the promotion of increased quality social interaction and rest time on board. Quality social interaction makes for stronger, more cohesive teams and increases opportunities to demonstrate allyship. You can find guidance on how to improve social interaction on your vessel here. More information about the SIM Project can be found at:

www.iswan.org.uk/our-work/social-interaction-matters-project

For a list of other available support, visit the campaign website:

<https://www.iswan.org.uk/our-work/safe-at-sea-campaign>





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