

WISTA - Press (01.10.2010)

World needs women seafarers to help solve crew shortages, IMO Secretary-General tells WISTA

Shipping companies have been urged by the Secretary-General of the International Maritime Organization to pay more attention to recruiting female seafarers as part of the drive to solve widespread crewing shortages.

Mr. Efthimios Mitropoulos told the annual Conference of WISTA International in Athens that women must be brought into the workforce on a much greater scale to help safeguard the future of the world merchant fleet.

Mr. Mitropoulos was delivering the Conference keynote address, on the theme of 2010, Year of the Seafarer, a designation which has helped to reinforce the need to come to grips with the long-predicted labour-supply shortage in the shipping industry. He insists that it is imperative for shipping to re-launch itself as a career of choice for the high calibre, high quality young people of today.

The IMO view is that there is no intrinsic reason why women should not participate in and benefit from employment in the shipping industry, but it is believed that a mere 1% or 2% of the global workforce of 1.5m seafarers are women.

The Secretary-General underlined his view that female seafarers are an under-utilised and underdeveloped resource that could provide part of the solution to the problem of crewing the world merchant fleet.

He reminded the WISTA assembly that substantial growth in trade was being predicted for 2010, which should be followed by considerable new job opportunities in the maritime sector, "and I hope that women will have their fair share in any such development."

Shipping cannot afford any longer to ignore the huge workforce potential provided by women, he said, in areas ranging from management, to seafarers "at the sharp end." Mr. Mitropoulos admitted that with crew numbers on some ships having been reduced to levels as low as 12 to 15, the work demands were immense, and a ship could be a lonely place during off duty hours; but the profession of seafarer was not only a satisfying career choice, it was a passport to a huge number of jobs ashore.

The concept of shipping as a man's world was being challenged, and barriers were falling. WISTA was attracting more women to the industry, and deserved all credit for doing that.

Mr. Mitropoulos said that as a United Nations agency, IMO had a long track record of fostering the advancement of women, and that gender equality should be considered a basic human right, "but there are still many battles to be fought and won in this regard."

The IMO leader endorsed the values of WISTA in regard to commitment to excellence, knowledge, training and education. His support for WISTA ideals go back many years, including having addressed the previous WISTA International Conference to be held in the Greek capital, in 1996. This year's WISTA event is the 30th annual Conference.

During a question session, M Mitropoulos was asked for his view on pressure within the European Union to go ahead with its own regulations on curbing greenhouse gas emissions if the IMO failed to produce major breakthroughs. He replied that IMO was making good progress on the 'three pillars' (operational, technical and market-based methods) of an action plan agreed in 2006.

He warned that a double approach of regional and international rules would be unacceptable to global shipping. "Ships are not elastic objects that can change their design and construction in accordance with their next port of call. To move away from the IMO philosophy of a level playing field would be anathema." He was optimistic that Europe would appreciate that the parameters had changed following the inconclusive Copenhagen conference in December 2009 on climate change.