

Gender Perspectives in the Maritime Domain

Key maritime security challenges

In October 2025, NATO launched its new Maritime Strategy, noting terrorism as the main asymmetric threat to the Alliance. Terrorist groups have expanded into transnational criminal activities, including piracy, activities against shipping and critical maritime infrastructure, the exploitation and instrumentalization of irregular migration, and the illegal trafficking of humans, weapons and narcotics. These activities pose significant human security threats to both men and women, brought into focus through applying a gender lens to contemporary maritime security challenges.

Women in the maritime workforce

Women are vastly underrepresented in the global maritime workforce. According to a [2024 survey by the International Maritime Organisation](#), women represent only 1% of the active seafaring workforce. [Factors influencing this](#) involve challenging social relations onboard, difficulties in succeeding professionally due to discrimination and stereotypes, lack of support for family planning options and the physical conditions onboard vessels.

Within NATO member states naval forces, the picture is improved; in 2024 women represented 12.4% of naval personnel across the alliance. However, the maritime domain is still often thought of as masculine or gender-neutral space, and there remains work to be done to facilitate women's greater participation at sea. Gender Advisors (GENADs) and Gender Focal Points (GFPs) are deployed across commands and functions, and are critical to integrating gender perspectives into all NATO activities.

NATO Operation Sea Guardian

Operation Sea Guardian is a non-Article 5 maritime security operation aimed at working with Mediterranean stakeholders to maintain maritime situational awareness, deter and counter terrorism and enhance capacity building. Within this operation, the GENAD and GFPs are responsible for ensuring the integration of gender perspectives into all activities under the mandate of the operation.



Understanding the land-sea nexus

There is a tendency to view the maritime domain as separate from the land domain. However, maritime security threats are innately linked with the land domain, as they are sustained by land-based infrastructure and have collateral effects there.

Among these security threats, [piracy was notably on the increase in 2025](#). As the majority of the global seafaring workforce, men represent the majority of victims of piracy, and direct perpetrators of piracy are also nearly exclusively male. However, women may support piracy through financing and participating in land-based operations, while others may be sexually exploited by such groups or face indirect impacts on land in communities where men have died at sea or are imprisoned.

Paying attention to the connection between maritime and land domains, alongside collecting sex and age disaggregated data, enables us to gain more complete and gender aware picture of human and maritime security dynamics, noting who is affected, and where. Integrating these considerations into planning and command decision-making facilitates greater operational effectiveness in maritime and multi-domain operations.



The maritime domain is not a gender neutral space. Maritime security challenges pose differing threats to men, women, boys and girls. NATO works to integrate gender perspectives through deploying GENADs and GFPs across the command structure. Nations should support recruitment and retention initiatives for women in the naval forces in order to facilitate their participation.