

# GENDER AT SEA



YEARBOOK  
OF **WOMEN'S**  
HISTORY  
JAARBOEK  
VOOR **VROUWEN-**  
GESCHIEDENIS

41





YEARBOOK OF WOMEN'S HISTORY /  
JAARBOEK VOOR VROUWENGESCHIEDENIS 41

# Gender at Sea



Hilversum  
2022

This publication was made possible by financial contributions from the following generous supporters: Feministisch Cultuurfonds Gender&Wetenschap, Samenwerkende Maritieme Fondsen, Stichting Professor Van Winter Fonds and Stichting Vriendinnen van het Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis.

#### Yearbook information

Editorial board: Djoeke van Netten (guest editor), Eveline Buchheim, Sarah Carmichael, Sophie van den Elzen, Ernestine Hoegen, Kirsten Kamphuis, Marleen Reichgelt, Larissa Schulte Nordholt, Sidra Shahid, Heleen Wyffels, Iris van der Zande.

*The Yearbook of Women's History / Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* is peer-reviewed.

Contact editors: Ernestine Hoegen, [contact@ernestinehoegen.nl](mailto:contact@ernestinehoegen.nl)

Cover Design: Frederike Bouten, Utrecht, Netherlands

Page layout design: Jan Johan ter Poorten, Aperta, Hilversum, Netherlands

Bookcover: © National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.

ISBN 9789464550399

© Copyright 2022 Stichting Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis, authors

Verloren Publishers

Torenlaan 25

NL-1211 JA Hilversum

T: +31 35 6859856

E: [info@verloren.nl](mailto:info@verloren.nl)

[www.verloren.nl](http://www.verloren.nl)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

*The publisher has tried to locate all holders of copyrighted materials. If you think you own the copyright, please contact the publisher.*

# Contents

IRIS VAN DER ZANDE ON BEHALF OF THE EDITORIAL BOARD Preface	9
DJOEKE VAN NETTEN Introduction Taking Women on Board	11
<i>Women and Children First: Uncovering the Presence of Women and Children on Board</i>	
LAUREL SEABORN Searching for Signs of Seafaring Women in the Age of Sail	19
SARAH LENTZ Overlooked Inhabitants of the 'Wooden World' Child Passengers as Part of Shipboard Societies in the Age of Sail	33
JOAN DRUETT 'The Late Fashion' Discovering Whaling Wives at Sea	47
KRISTOF LOOCKX Jackie of All Trades The Emergence of Stewardesses in the Belgian Fleet, 1870-1914	51
IRIS VAN DER ZANDE The Cruise Tourist's Corset Gender, Space, and Mobility on Dutch Youth Cruises in the 1930s	67
<i>Experiences at Sea: Women Travelling from Europe to Asia and Australia</i>	
SIMON KARSTENS An Unfaithful Wife and a Cross-Dressing Soldier Christian Burckhardt's Report of Two Women Sailing to Batavia in 1675	83

FELICITY JENSZ	95
Neptune's Visit Made Palatable	
Gender and Journeys over the Line in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century	
RON BRAND AND KIRSTEN KAMPHUIS	113
Zusters op zee	
Reiservaringen van missiezusters naar Nederlands-Indië en Indonesië in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw	
EMILY HUTCHESON	131
Women in Ocean Science	
The Two-Part Research Programme of the <i>Siboga</i> Expedition	
VICKI S. HALLETT	145
Salt Fish Maids	
Untold Stories of Gender and Sex in the Labrador Floater Fishery	
<i>Violence and Victims: Gendered Agency on Board</i>	
VIRGINIA W. LUNSFORD	159
Piracy and the Hidden History of Female Agency	
The Case of the Buccaneers	
ALICIA SCHRIKKER	173
Januari's schim	
ELISA CAMISCIOLI	189
Sexing the Steamship	
Prostitution, Trafficking, and Maritime Travel	
JO STANLEY	203
Women/Sea/Misogyny	
Ending Silences about Sexual Abuse at Sea	
VÍCTOR RAMÍREZ TUR	219
Problematizing Homoerotic Relationships on the High Seas	
The Exhibition 'Desire Flows Like the Sea'	

*Stories to be Told: Power and Representations of Women at Sea*

ROBERTA FRANCHI	229
Woman and the Sea in Classical and Christian Texts	
MUHAMMAD BUANA	245
The Stranger Sea Queens	
Gender, Migration, and Power in Sulawesi and Javanese Traditions	
STEFAN ROEL REYES	257
<i>'Tweete Sielle'</i>	
The Affective Presence of Women in the Sailing Letters of Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Dutch Seafarers	
VALERIE SALLIS	269
Spiritual Anchors or Sinful Shoals	
Women, Religion, and Spirituality in the Shipboard Writings of American Sailors, 1810-1859	
RUSSELL FIELDING AND INA SEETHALER	283
Women and Whaling in the Faroe Islands	
Summaries	295
About the Authors	303





# Preface

The Dutch folk song, *Daar was laatst een meisje loos*, which is still known as a children's song today, refers to a seventeenth and eighteenth-century clandestine practice of women who, disguised as men, signed up as sailors on merchant and war ships.<sup>1</sup> The song narrates that a girl, who is dressed in men's clothes, goes sailing at sea. Because she does not manage to tie the sails properly, the girl is forced to visit the captain below deck to be punished. Going there, her 'true' sex is revealed. The folk song continues by mentioning that the girl gets involved in a sexual relationship with the captain after which she becomes pregnant. Once back ashore, the girl tells her mother that she and the captain will marry.

This folk song reveals a lot about the general view of women in the maritime domain. Women, who want to participate in marine life at sea, are entering a male-dominated space that is perceived as dangerous and unsuitable for them because sexual norms could be crossed. Besides, it is suggested that women also lack the competence to work on board because, as the song narrates, they cannot tie the sails. In the end, they are only useful and (ab)used to satisfy men's sexual needs.

For this year's volume, we, as editors of the *Yearbook of Women's History*, wanted to address these gendered issues of presence, inclusion, exclusion, and sexuality in the maritime space. In this year's volume *Gender at Sea*, Dr. Djoeke van Netten joined our team as guest editor. We are very happy to have her 'on board' because of her extensive knowledge about both maritime and gender history.

Previous volumes of our Yearbook *Sekse en Oorlog* and *Women on Fire* touched upon the presence and the role of women in armed forces in particular, and the workings of gender during wartime in general. They zoomed in on war and the battlefield as different spaces and places that are perceived as predominantly male territories that silence and marginalize women. Moreover, both *Sekse en Oorlog* and *Women on Fire* discussed how gender dynamics changed in the context of war.

In line with these previous yearbooks, we brought together new and original contributions that emphasize the presence and influence of gendered ideas and practices in the maritime past. The contributions focus particularly on gender *at sea*; what happens when women board a ship in a specific time and place? How are gender dynamics working and changing in this space due to different circumstances and how does the maritime space influence the inclusion and exclusion of people that are not white, heterosexual, and male? By considering these questions via various contributions we aim to stimulate discussions in the field of maritime history where these questions do not (yet) receive enough attention.

This Yearbook emphasizes that gender is a perspective that has added value for researchers and is essential to understand the world and its dynamics, both in the past and the present. Therefore, this Yearbook has an international scope, connecting seas from the East, North, South, and West discussing both the national, international, and colonial dimensions of gender at sea.

During the presentation of our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue *Living Concepts: Forty Years of Engaging Gender and History* in January 2022, it became clear that the Yearbook facilitates a community that examines the role of gender in research, fuelled by a desire to expose gender issues and inequalities in sources, research practices, and society. With our current volume *Gender at Sea* we argue that the gender perspective requires ongoing attention for researchers who are examining people and spaces at sea and we hope to encourage further discussion on gender in this field.

Sarah Carmichael, Sophie van den Elzen, Ernestine Hoegen, Kirsten Kamphuis, Larissa Schulte Nordholt, Marleen Reichgelt, Sidra Shahid, Heleen Wyffels, and Iris van der Zande.

#### Note

- 1 Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol, *Daar was laatst een meisje loos: Nederlandse vrouwen als matrozen en soldaten, een historisch onderzoek* (Amsterdam: Ambo/Anthos, 1981).

# Introduction

## Taking Women on Board

DJOEKE VAN NETTEN

A woman on a boat. What is she doing there? In the present volume we question and challenge the absence of women in maritime history. What can be told about their presence and their experiences through the ages?

To introduce the theme of this year's volume of the *Yearbook of Women's History*, I would like to start by invoking one well known woman on a boat, or at least well known when living with an eight-year-old and a Disney+-subscription.

The woman under scrutiny, actually a sixteen-year-old girl, is Moana (also known as Vaiana), the main character in Disney's eponymous film from 2016. She is the daughter of the chief of the fictional Polynesian island Motonui. Against the rules, against (alleged) tradition, and against her father's will, Moana sets sail to save her island. She navigates the ocean to find the demigod Maui and to return a magic stone, the heart of Te Fiti, to the goddess of nature, thus saving her people, and the world.

The film has been praised, but also severely criticized, for its portrayal of Polynesian culture. Moana herself is mostly reviewed positively, as another step by Disney towards diversity and inclusivity, following Disney's other princesses of colour, Pocahontas (1995) and Tiana (2009). Moreover, while earlier Disney princesses were all portrayed unrealistically thin with unusually long limbs, very large eyes, and small noses, Moana breaks with this body type.<sup>1</sup> She has been hailed as one of the 'new' androgynous Disney princesses. In contrast with the 'old' passive princesses like Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, who were just waiting to be saved by prince charming, these modern girls (Rapunzel, Elsa from *Frozen*, Merida in *Brave*) take their fates into their own hands.<sup>2</sup> They exhibit both typical feminine as well as masculine character traits. In the case of Moana, the latter even dominate, subverting gender stereotypes.<sup>3</sup>

One allegedly masculine trait, that has gone unnoticed in popular critiques as well as scholarly articles, is the fact that Moana is sailing. The maritime world, and

seafaring in particular, has – in almost all known cultures and places – been dominated by men. Women stayed on land, while men ventured out over sea. Traditional superstitions pertaining to women at sea allude to bad luck, bad weather, or worse. Women would distract the crew, and anger the sea itself. At best, shipowners have been ambivalent about female presence on their ships, and for centuries women were more or less explicitly excluded from military, merchant, and many other vessels.

The discipline of maritime history has been a mostly masculine undertaking as well. Notwithstanding several noteworthy exceptions, most authors and readers of books on maritime history have been, and still are, male. Moreover, gender-related issues are rarely addressed in maritime overview works.<sup>4</sup>

But – and this is a very important ‘but’ – like in many other realms of history, when scholars start looking for women, they will find them. In recent years, this has time and again been shown, for example with regard to military undertakings, scholarly culture and correspondence, cartography, nobility, and the printing business.<sup>5</sup> Several authors in this volume indicate how maritime women were made invisible and faded from historical records (Fielding and Seethaler, Lunsford), but also how closer examination may reveal them and how lost female voices and female objects can be found (Hutcheson, Hallett, Seaborn).

When, in October 2021, the editorial board of the *Yearbook of Women's History* issued a call for papers on the theme of ‘gender and the sea’, we were met with an overwhelming response.<sup>6</sup> To keep the project feasible, we had to be painfully strict. The first decision was to make the sea the main criterion for selection; all the articles focus on ships and practices *at sea*, not primarily on land. On a sidenote: we hope to be able to issue another volume on women in ports, on shores, in the near future. Proposals were sent in from various corners of the world (though mostly from Europe and North America), by women *and* men (male authors apparently form a rare sight in the field of women's history), about various historical periods (though with an emphasis on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century), and from a range of different disciplinary backgrounds.

The latter could be considered as a possible weakness, threatening the coherence of the volume as such. More likely, however, this variety is a great strength of this special issue. Not only are ancient history and modern history not often found together, (sub)disciplines like maritime archaeology, mobility studies, history of childhood, history of science, literary history, queer history, and history of emotions are not usually in conversation with one another. Every article deals with women (and some children) at sea, but the concepts, theories, and bodies of literature referred to vary greatly. Not all authors have a background in gender or women's history, and subsequently not all contributions engage equally thoroughly with concepts and theories from gender history. All authors, however, are very knowledgeable in specific aspects of life at sea in certain times and places. This volume for the first time unites their expertise with a focus on women and gender.

Not only does this add to women's history, it will form an important step in changing the whole of maritime history as well.<sup>7</sup> As Kristof Loockx points out in this

volume, the historiography on women at sea has mostly developed in isolation from general maritime history. Works by authors like Joan Druett, Linda Grant de Pauw, Margaret Creighton and Lisa Norling, Sari Mäenpää, Ursula Feldkamp, Brit Berggreen, Suzanne Stark, and Jo Stanley, to name a few, already form an important pile of literature. We are honoured that Joan Druett and Jo Stanley have contributed to this issue. For the sake of brevity, I refer to Stanley's piece in this volume, her unsurpassed website, and her blog 'Gender and the Sea', for more on the history of writing the history of women at sea.<sup>8</sup> We express the hope that this volume will raise consciousness on women and gender-related issues at sea to *all* maritime historians. The exhibition 'Desire flows like the sea' in the Museu Marítim de Barcelona, on which Víctor Ramírez Tur writes in this volume, and the photography exhibition *Mens op zee* ('Humans at Sea') in the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam (on display October 2022-May 2023) are just two exciting examples of how an inclusive, gender-conscious maritime history can be presented to a general public. In short, the aim of this volume is to show the diversity and the agency of women on board, to uncover their experiences and gendered practices at sea.

On the cover of this volume we find another woman in a boat, on a life raft to be precise. At first sight many differences with Moana can be pointed out, like age, colour, static/dynamic. Moreover, we do not even know this woman's name. The picture, actually a small photograph measuring six by six centimetres, is kept in the collection of the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam and it is dated 1938.<sup>9</sup> This is another difference with Moana, about whom it remains very vague in which past she sails.<sup>10</sup> Still, the woman on the cover is an anonymous woman on an anonymous ship, pictured by an anonymous photographer. If anyone knows more about the woman, the ship, or the photographer, we would be very grateful, and very curious.

Besides differences, there is a striking parallel between Moana and this 1930s-woman. Both are apparently alone on a ship. Moana starts out sailing alone, and after an interlude during which she is joined by Maui – more on him later – she goes back to sailing on her own. In reality, most women did not sail alone. All the people in the articles below were sailing with a company of at least a few, but more often with dozens or even hundreds of fellow travellers. In almost every case, the majority of them was male.<sup>11</sup> The interaction of people of different genders on a ship thus forms a major theme throughout this volume. Women on a ship could be wives or girlfriends, daughters, mothers, subordinate or in some cases superior, or working alongside men. Their encounters could be happy and supportive, but women could also be victimized and abused. The latter observation, in particular, forms a sharp contrast with the current presentation of women in the navy (try and google 'navy women', they are all smiling) or well-known female pirates such as Anne Bonny, Mary Read, and Grace O'Malley. The stories in this volume create a welcome, and sometimes unsettling, correction to prevailing imagery.

## *On Ships and Fluidity*

As will be shown in the articles following this introduction, a ship is a special place. A heterotopia, an 'other-place' *par excellence*, according to Michel Foucault.<sup>12</sup> Embarking on a ship means crossing boundaries by definition (Camiscioli, Brand and Kamphuis), with the sea as a barrier and an element of separation, but also as a connection, in particular between men at sea and women on land (Buana, Franchi, Sallis, Reyes).

A ship is not only oftentimes used as a metaphor for the church or the state, it is also an emblem of adventure, suggesting a break with traditions (Buana, Franchi). This is the way ships and sailing are portrayed in *Moana*. Ships can be considered playgrounds, places of fun and pleasure (Loockx, Lentz, Ramírez Tur, Van der Zande). For many, a ship has induced dreams of finding a better life, at sea or over sea (Buana, Camiscioli). For Moana and many other girls and women, the sea has offered experiences of freedom and escape (Van der Zande, Franchi, Lentz). However, while indeed a ship can be, or at first can seem to be, a space of opportunity and freedom, it can also turn out to be a space of fear, suppression, and trauma (Camiscioli, Lunsford, Stanley, Schrikker).

Even on Moana's small vessel, some differentiation between spaces on the ship can be discerned. Steering at the rear, looking out from the mast, storage under deck. It is important to zoom in on ships and what happened where, and who was involved. Jan Karstens in particular shows how spaces on a ship were defined and marked by gender. Several other articles in this volume indicate spaces of (gendered) inclusion and exclusion (Lentz, Van der Zande, Camiscioli, Fielding and Seethaler).

As Sarah Lentz mentions in her article, ships are liminal and fluid spaces. And it is this fluidity that comes to the fore in many other stories of women (and children, and queer people) at sea. The fluidity of the ocean itself seems to affect gender norms, gendered practices, and gender relations.

Probably most well known are women who dressed up as men or boys to get on board a ship. After decades of research, Rudolf Dekker and Lotte van de Pol have identified over 120 women sailors and soldiers who disguised themselves as men.<sup>13</sup> Many more must have gone unnoticed, or have at least not ended up in currently known sources. In this volume, Elisa Camiscioli describes how women disguised themselves in men's clothing to get on board, while Jan Karstens shows how a woman who worked, dressed, and behaved as a man, was (at least temporarily) accepted as a man. When (literally) un-covered, a transformation back to woman went via (un)dressing to typical women's clothing and relocating to women's spaces on a ship. Felicity Jensz discusses transgressing gender norms and cross-dressing the other way round: men dressing (up) as women during highly gendered, male-dominated rituals when crossing the equator.

On board, the boundaries between adults and children could become fluid as well. On a ship, boys (and sometimes girls) had to do men's work, while adult passengers sometimes 'played like little children' (Lentz). When a bit older, especially for teenage passengers, different rules and expectations applied for boys and girls respectively (Lentz, Van der Zande). We also have to be aware of the places and moments where

women were *not* transforming or challenging, or not able to challenge, gender roles (Lunsford, Camiscioli).

Kristof Loockx and Vicki Hallett both describe how women workers on cruise ships and fishing boats respectively were principally hired to do domestic tasks, like cleaning, cooking, and caretaking. On the other hand, under pressure, and especially on smaller vessels, boundaries between stereotypical gender roles and tasks became fluid quite easily. Men stepped into roles traditionally held by women (Sallis), or in some (recent) cases, women performed tasks previously considered exclusively for men (Fielding and Seethaler). This is shown in several more instances, for example when men complain that they had to do maid's tasks like caring for the sick (Lentz), or when whaler's wives found it very strange to have their food cooked and cabins cleaned by men (Druett), or when girls had to process fish and even sailing the ship when there was a lack of available men to do it (Hallett), or when a female scientist quite unusually participated in one of the most important oceanographic expeditions of the nineteenth century (Hutcheson).

Sexually, as well, men could take 'women's' roles or violently force others into 'female' positions (Schrikker, Ramírez Tur). Stefan Roel Reyes emphasizes how even the meanings of love became fluid while sailing. In many cases, the fluidity ended on shore, where adults stopped playing, where disguised women and cross-dressed men reverted to wearing clothing which conformed to gendered norms, where women and men resumed the tasks that they were expected to carry out, and where the adventure was over (or was just about to begin ...).

What do we learn taking this fluidity into account? What does it tell us about the cultural and social constructions of gender norms and boundaries? Do indeed ships allow for liminal spaces in which societal expectations can be left behind? Or does this lens demonstrate that we have to rethink *all* supposed gender norms and fe/male stereotypes in early modern and modern times? How mutable was gender in the past? How many people on board did not identify with binary gender identities? Is the use of two binary opposites too narrow anyway? Would it be better to opt for a more intersectional approach, taking into account at least nationality, religion, socio-economic status, and colour? The important role of colour and race is addressed in some of the articles in this volume (Schrikker, Brand and Kamphuis, Ramírez Tur), as is the role of Indigenous people (Hutcheson, Sallis). This remains an important aspect that is often overlooked in maritime history. When still sticking to binary opposites, how do we actually know someone is a woman? Laurel Seaborn in this volume for example shows how high heels found in a shipwreck are definitely *not* female fashion items. Of young children their gender is mostly not mentioned, not all names are clearly female or male, and of many seafaring people we do not know any names at all. As to queerness, when 'don't ask don't tell' is the motto, how can future researchers know? We hope to inspire many more historians to take up these challenges.





For centuries seafaring people thought that the presence of women on board would mean bad luck: rough weather, shipwreck, and other disasters were sure to follow. Because of these beliefs and prejudices women were supposedly excluded from the maritime domain. In the field of maritime history too, the ship and the sea have predominantly been perceived as a space for men. This volume of the *Yearbook of Women's History* challenges these notions. It asks: to what extent were the sea and the ship ever male-dominated and masculine spaces? How have women been part of seafaring communities, maritime undertakings, and maritime culture? How did gender notions impact life on board and vice versa? From a multidisciplinary perspective, this volume moves from Indonesia to the Faroe Islands, from the Mediterranean to Newfoundland; bringing to light the presence of women and the workings of gender on sailing, whaling, steam, cruise, passenger, pirate, and navy ships. As a whole it demonstrates the diversity and the agency of women at sea from ancient times to the present day.