



Getting On Board or Going Overboard: A Case Study on Gender Inequality's Impact on the Shipping Industry

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Abstract

Background: This case study explores gender inequality in the shipping industry through the story of the protagonist, Maria Bahar, a young woman facing potential discrimination at her job. Students will analyze the situation, consider various responses, and recommend solutions. Through discussion questions, student participants will develop critical thinking and decision-making skills for navigating complex workplace dynamics in a globalized socioeconomic context. Students to weigh evidence, justify their approaches, and grapple with the complexities of navigating potentially unfair situations. **Objectives:** The goal is to consider the best path forward for the protagonist, and to understand the factors presented in the case study that are impacting said experiences. **Learning Outcomes:** Students will be able to address complex ethical situations, utilize the available resources to make decisions, and engage in collaborative problem-solving to address gender inequality. **Use:** For instructional purposes with students in business management, supply chain, shipping, human resources, women and gender studies, or similar courses/fields. Global applications of this case study should be considered, especially for teams that include people from multiple cultures, identities, and beliefs. **Teaching Notes:** Teaching materials available upon request.

Keywords: Gender Inequality, Ethical Leadership, Social Change Theory, Discrimination in the Workplace, Shipping Industry.

Paper type: Case Study

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Case Description

Fleeing war-torn Aleppo, Syria, Maria Bahar seeks a new beginning in Piraeus, Greece, landing a job at Ocean Blue, a shipping company in one of the world's largest ports. But Ocean Blue is roiled by deep-seated economic and social issues, forcing Maria to navigate a series of challenges as she fights for her rights, her livelihood, and potentially a chance to change the culture of the shipping industry altogether.

Case Synopsis

Maria Bahar, a young refugee woman new to a shipping company in Piraeus, Greece, faces a potential case of gender inequality. This case study delves into her situation, encouraging students to analyze the complexities of workplace dynamics in a globalized and socioeconomic context. Through thought-provoking discussion questions, students will explore various responses and recommend solutions to address potential gender discrimination in the workplace. The case fosters critical thinking and decision-making skills, as students learn to justify their reasoning and navigate the intricacies of potentially unfair situations.

Background & Case Story

Ocean Blue

In one of the largest ports in the world, Piraeus, home of hundreds of shipping companies competing with each other in a highly competitive environment, there exists one small shipping company named Ocean Blue. Ocean Blue is known for staying competitive with peers by transporting bulk cargo to small islands and other ships that their larger peers were not capable of transporting. Although it was a small company, Ocean Blue had managed to have a near monopoly on the carriage of cargo in the areas in which it operated, making it a highly profitable team with room still to grow. A large part of that success was thanks to Mr. Nicholas Alexiou, the Manager of Ocean Blue, who has spent the last 20 years at the helm, carving out as many profitable avenues as he could.

The Captain, a Leading Figure of Ocean Blue

The most important role in the company was played by the ship's retired captain named Michalis Messologlou (known by members of the company as "the Captain"), whose role included deciding on key issues of ship operations. These operations included the renewal of ship certificates, registrations, inspections, and daily procedures, announcements of departure and arrival of ships, and so on. This role was vital to the overall success of the company's day-to-day approach, of which the Captain's supervisor, Mr. Alexiou, would remind him frequently. Ocean Blue's success, after all, would not be nearly as abundant without the Captain's work.

A Troubled Past and a Prosperous Future

Maria's upbringing was not always an easy one. The young woman originates from the city of Aleppo, in northern Syria. Despite historically being a major economic and cultural center, due to the ongoing dangerous conflict, the city has suffered significant damage and displacement of its population. Many of the helpless inhabitants have found refuge in Greece, including Maria, who was the only member of her family that

managed to escape the war. She initially found temporary accommodation in a refugee camp in Chios, Greece, where she stayed for six months and then moved to Athens to seek job opportunities. Maria was an award-winning scholar at the University of Damascus, with a major in Business Administration and a minor in Shipping and Transportation. Her high qualification status gave her a considerable advantage in career opportunities but she was also aware of the shipping culture and the discrimination that female workers received. There was no option of looking back.

Maria Bahar came to Greece seeking refuge. Though the unemployment rate is high, Maria knew landing a job could provide a safe and stable life for her and any future family members. She began working with a refugee center to get settled and provide stability in her life. While there was typically very little luck in landing a long-term job in Greece these days, Maria had no other option but to wait and see. After about nine months, the refugee center was able to place her with Ocean Blue in a role that was initially temporary but quickly became a more permanent role if Maria proved to be an asset to the team. Her willingness to learn and eagerness to do well resulted in Maria's quick success with the company, and Michalis, the Captain, took notice. As she would be assigned tasks, she would complete them before their deadline and would deliver them to perfection. Oftentimes, she would go above and beyond by helping others learn to maximize team productivity. After three years, Maria began shadowing Michalis to get a better understanding of his role, responsibilities, and the overall operations of the organization. The Captain was impressed with Maria's development as a team member and developed a cohesive, productive working relationship with her. He began to think of her as his right-hand person and trusted her completely with the job duties she took on. Maria felt deep gratitude for what she was learning next to him, respecting him and seeing him as her mentor.

However, the Captain came down with an illness that sidelined him sporadically, leaving Maria to complete his tasks on the days he was not in his office due to his health. Knowing what his health situation was like she felt an obligation to help him as much as she could and not let him down under any circumstances.

Although she was relatively new to the Captain's responsibilities, Maria focused all her attention on carrying out all the Captain's job tasks, some of which included the renewal of certificates for the ships, daily itinerary and routes, cargo handling arrangements for loading and discharging of vessels, port activities, and so on. She felt that she had a large part of the responsibility to carry out the procedures that would make the company run smoothly. More specifically, those responsibilities encompassed the shipping routes to be as planned and arrivals at the ports to be on time even if it meant that she had to work long hours each day, rising early and leaving well after everyone else. Most notably, Maria proposed new management objectives and implemented the company's first comprehensive work plan. This plan aimed to enhance employee productivity and streamline operations by establishing improved work procedures and redesigning tasks. She was able to show the company's leadership that she was thinking about the long-term strategic plan and success of the company.

"You're doing such a great job filling in and completing my tasks," the Captain said energetically. "I feel like you're ready for whatever comes your way."

Maria had to find a way to continue excelling in the role to avoid further harm and displacement.

The Fall of Ocean Blue

A crippling economic downturn had gripped the company for the past five years, escalating in the last two years to sow chaos and disrupt every aspect of its operations. Employees and administrators alike grew increasingly worried. This decline was mainly due to the significant economic crisis that had a heavy effect on the majority of Greek firms. At the same time, the highly competitive environment which introduced fierce competition from international rivals with rock-bottom prices compounded the crisis, while the lax regulations and public policies further exacerbated Ocean Blue's position in the industry. After a while, Mr. Alexiou reached an impasse. His initial approach of handling this difficult situation gave way to widespread anxiety and lackluster decision-making.

To make matters worse, Mr. Alexiou did not believe that the professional development of employees at Ocean Blue was a main priority. Simply being able to financially get by with each passing year was all he could focus on. This led to a callousness to his leadership approach, oftentimes becoming non-communicative and strategically bereft. He began to lack the initiative to develop a team culture that allowed members to grow beyond their current roles and repeatedly avoided taking risks, being afraid of further worsening the company's financial situation. Many employees began to grow restless and stagnant at a company that was on the brink of downsizing. If they were not careful, this could prove to be of significant detriment to Ocean Blue's future.

Looming inspections threatened the firm's future and reputation, a dark cloud amplified by the captain's absence due. This left the crew feeling desperate, especially for Mr. Alexiou, whose worry gnawed at him the most.

The Phone Altercation

Although not fully recovered from the illness, the Captain felt it was necessary to communicate his physical condition so that Ocean Blue does not suffer in the long-term. He decided to make some calls.

"There are some things that can't wait," said the Captain as he picked up the phone and cleared his throat. "Plans must be made." He dialed the first person who needed to know.

The silence was heavy before a familiar voice broke it. "Captain! What a nice surprise!" said the voice.

"Michalis, sir.. It's great hearing from you," said the Captain with a bit of unease. "How are you doing?"

"I'm just fine... Captain, you don't sound very good..." said Mr. Alexiou.

"I am still recovering, but there are serious matters that cannot be postponed," said the Captain.

"You're talking about the inspection of course. Right, right, that's a good point," said Mr. Alexiou, now both sharing the worry.

"I am." said the Captain determined. "I will return to the ship and be present while the inspections are taking place. You have my word..."

"That is brilliant. I am very pleased to hear that, Captain," said Mr. Alexiou, showing his excitement.

"There is one thing though," said the Captain regarding the sensitive turn this discussion was about to take. "You know I am not getting any younger. And you also have seen how the tables can turn and how dangerous it is for the company to not have a person responsible for the tasks I've taken."

"We've talked about this. It's out of the question," said Mr. Alexiou, with a serious tone, interrupting the captain once again.

"Mr. Alexiou, I am aware of your concerns but there is no other way," said the Captain, equally setting the tone of his voice. "It is simple. I will retire soon. We have interviewed multiple candidates, and no one matched our expectations. It will take us much time and many resources to train one and the possibilities of the result being the one we seek are still low. I know Maria. I've worked with her on multiple occasions. I've seen her capabilities and I'm aware of the areas she still has time to grow in."

The Captain suddenly coughed and tried to rearrange his thoughts. "... and I know that this woman and her passion is what the company needs. Maria can make this company prosper," said the Captain, convinced his speech was solid enough to make an argument in Mr. Alexiou's eyes.

"Captain..." said Mr. Alexiou. It was evident that the Captain felt uneasy.

"I respect your opinion and your courage to express your feelings," said Mr. Alexiou.

"These were not feelings, Mr. Alexiou. These are the facts," said the Captain, preparing himself for what was coming.

"And the answer is 100% no!" yelled Mr. Alexiou, anger rising in his voice. "You must truly ignore the culture behind shipping. You are clearly not taking into consideration what will happen if I..." said Mr. Alexiou, pausing to assert his dominance. "... take this decision. It will be the end of this company. There will be no hierarchy, no obedience! The workers would never accept a—"

Mr. Alexiou knew this conversation was going to happen eventually and he had been prepared. But his frustration couldn't hold his words back.

"A, uh.. A woman! There is no chance! Even the inspectors wouldn't take her seriously. They would laugh at us and that would be the end of Ocean Blue as we know it. Aren't you even aware of the catastrophe that follows your proposition?" said Mr. Alexiou, now realizing that he has gone too far.

Mr. Alexiou takes a deep breath, calms himself, and continues. The Captain is silent.

"What I am trying to say here, Captain, is that it will be disastrous for us and for Maria, to apply this strategy. I truly support women's rights! And I aspire to have your courage

to take a stand on the matter. But can we please consider the consequences?” said Mr. Alexiou, switching back to his diplomatic behavior. A short breath in and out as he tries to steady himself for the response.

After a few moments of pause, the Captain seems ready to speak.

“Mr. Alexiou...” said the Captain, expecting the manager’s prior behavior. “There are no such consequences. Maria has already worked with at least 70% of the crew. They know her. And truly, they respect her. We, the crew...” said the Captain trying to seclude the manager and imply that there is no one sharing his thoughts. “... We respect her. We know that society hasn’t given women the opportunity to take such jobs or be responsible for such heavy duties. But Maria really leaned into the opportunity! She shadowed me and tried to learn as much as she could. I was a bit skeptical in the beginning, but she is a great student. She copied the way that I work and even developed her own approach and style...”

The Captain tried to lighten the conversation, laughing at his own last words and leaving room for the manager to laugh too. There was dead silence coming from the other line.

“What I’m trying to say is that she took the risk and has shown us all that determination and passion are far more important than someone’s gender when it comes to this work. Can’t you be more... open-minded?” said the Captain with a charming tone.

“Open-minded?! Are you saying that to me, Captain?” said Mr. Alexiou. Words couldn’t describe his frustration. His voice grew agitated.

“This conversation is over. The inspection is scheduled for tomorrow. I kindly ask you to attend. It is crucial for our company.” said Mr. Alexiou.

The Captain took a breath and got interrupted before saying anything. “And don’t you dare call Maria to the inspection, Captain! We will discuss this matter in person. Goodbye.”

The phone abruptly hung up before the Captain had a chance to say goodbye. It was after the call ended that the Captain feared he may have pushed the manager too far. But was it far enough to make a difference in advocating for Maria? Or did it result in Mr. Alexiou being angered beyond change?

Word Travels Fast

As the inspection took place, the inspectors found glaring deficiencies existing with the ships. One ship had been characterized as unsafe for navigation, something that was sure to negatively impact the reputation (and bottom line) of the company.

Word travels fast. Maria was aware of the Manager’s opinions about her as well as plans regarding her position. A week earlier, Thalia, a female worker, was fired for uncertain reasons. There were rumours among employees that Mr. Alexiou was unhappy and planned to continue firing female workers. As the weeks went by, Maria noticed that she was being cut off and her responsibilities were shrinking. She took it as a sign to reevaluate her role with the company. She calculated possible outcomes,

organized her thoughts, slept on them, and decided to arrange a meeting with the Manager in order to get things clear and make a final decision.

“Alexiou speaking. Who is this?” said the Manager, after picking up the phone.

“Hello Mr. Alexiou, this is Maria,” she said, with her voice shaking. She was trying not to let her nervousness shake her confidence.

“Oh...Maria. I am quite surprised. What can I do for you? Why are you calling” said Mr. Alexiou.

The Manager was surprised indeed. He had been careful not to give anyone the impression that they had the authority to call him personally.

“I would like to arrange a meeting with you, Mr. Alexiou. As soon as possible, if you have the time for it.” Maria said with a sense of sureness.

“A meeting... What do we have to meet about?” said the Manager, now fully aware of the situation.

“About my position in the company and my future plans,” said Maria with confidence.

“Oh... sure sure, this is a fair request. Come see me this Monday at 8 am sharp. Don't be late.” said Mr. Alexiou.

“Thank you, sir. See you then,” said Maria before hanging up the phone, breathing a sigh of relief.

Both shared the relief. But there was a growing unease about how things will go following the meeting.

Behind Closed Doors

It was a gloomy morning. Car horns filled the air, breaking the morning silence as people were venturing from their homes to work and school. Maria was deep in her thoughts, stuck in traffic a few streets away from Mr. Alexiou's office. She felt prepared for what was coming, fully aware that the Manager was ready too. She parked her car, took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell. “Hello?” said a crackling but familiar voice coming from the door phone.

“Good morning, it's Maria. I have an appointment with Mr. Alexiou,” she said as she tried to place the voice.

The door opened and Maria saw the face behind the voice. It was the Captain. She felt surprised and relieved. The friendly figure with a calming smile lightened her burden.

“Good morning, dear.” said the Captain with a smile.

“Good morning, Captain! I didn't know that you would be here,” said Maria.

“I am not supposed to. I have a very busy day, trying to solve several issues...” said the Captain, looking back at Mr. Alexiou's office door. “... that other people caused. I was just here to try to... pave the way for you, Maria. You deserve it. Do what you

believe, kid, but do not let people devalue you...for any reason” said the Captain, while heading out.

“Thank you, Captain... for everything,” said Maria, truly inspired and more determined than before.

Before knocking on the door, Maria overheard a heated phone conversation between the manager and what seemed to be the shipowner, Mr. Koras.

“Not this again. I don’t want anything more to hear from you Nicholas.” said the shipowner.

“I know Mr. Koras, I am very sorry to bother you again, sir. But the responsibilities lay heavy on my shoulders and I don’t want to make any rash decisions, sir,” said Mr. Alexiou, with growing anxiety clearly noticeable in his voice.

“Of course, they should lay heavy on your shoulders. You are the company’s manager—act like it.” said Mr. Koras.

“I know sir and I’m deeply sorry. But it’s all those inspections, the workforce complaining about their wages, the aggressive competition which is determined to make us fall apart, the captain’s retirement, and even the other issue... a female worker of ours who’s asking me if she can take over the Captain’s responsibilities,” said the manager, trying to find any comfort left in his superior’s words.

“Are you... You’ve got to be joking Mr. Alexiou! You have completely lost control. What are you even saying right now? I don’t want to hear all this. How have we been able to make a profit all these years? Do your job, there are no excuses! You’re supposed to be able to handle this on your own. Clean up this mess you created immediately!” said Mr. Koras, ending the phone call.

Maria was shocked but she decided to proceed with her plan. She took a deep breath as she focused on the closed door. Steadying herself, she knocked three times. “Mr. Alexiou, it’s Maria. I’m here for our meeting,” she said.

Five long seconds passed. Silence. Then, suddenly, “Get inside Maria,” said the voice behind the door. “Hurry.”

Maria opened the door and saw Mr. Alexiou sitting at his desk. He had a somber look on his face with dark circles under his eyes, revealing that he hadn’t had much sleep.

The silence was so loud; both Maria and Mr. Alexiou sat awkwardly.

“So... Maria,” said the Manager. “You’re here to talk about your position and the way that I mistreat you, is that right?”

Maria hadn’t expected that move. She thought that this would be a back-and-forth conversation where she would try to make a case that the Manager devalues her and he was going to deny it.

“That’s correct, Mr. Alexiou,” said Maria. “I appreciate the fact that you are being straightforward so that I will talk plainly.”

Hearing that, the Manager was impressed by her boldness. But a sudden thought crossed his mind: this is all an act. Maria is trying to convince him that she can get hold of any situation and assert her dominance when the time comes. He simply wouldn't stand for this.

"I am here because I am certain that I can take responsibilities beyond your expectations. I have shown great progress and my workflow is promising. Despite that, I am, day by day, getting tasks taken from me, while no one replaces them effectively, except the Captain when his health allows him to be present." said Maria determined.

"Listen Maria. You probably think that I am not aware of what is happening in this company. You may be thinking that I am delusional or that I do not support and appreciate you. Well, you are wrong!" yelled the Manager.

There was a sudden sorrow in his eyes. Maria had never seen the Manager in this situation. She was speechless.

"Maria, listen... Before coming to this company, I had the same exact beliefs. I know how difficult it is for women to prosper in their careers. I am aware that we should support these kinds of movements to solve the problem. But the thing is, Maria..."

The Manager continued. Maria was trying to understand if he was being sincere or if that was his game plan all along. She sat idle, attentively listening to every word.

"... I have analyzed the Greek shipping context. I've made numerous strategic plans based on my education, knowledge, and experiences that I have in this field. I have studied this, and I know that it is highly risky to make these seemingly brave decisions. A company in such a state should not ever take such risks! You are aware of the economic situation, right? We have a loyal agenda of customers and suppliers and there is a certain work culture that comes with it. There is a way things are getting done and neither me nor you can change them without risking everything we have built! Are you even aware of how dangerous it is to make even the slightest mistake and the long-term repercussions that come with it? You know how the inspection went. You want all of us to lose our jobs?" said Mr. Alexiou urgently- words spilled faster than he anticipated.

The Manager's tone was now increasingly unwavering. He was relentless. "We are not going to be brave and risk everything we've built to change the world! We cannot afford that. Why doesn't anyone understand that? You all made me the villain while the only thing I was doing was caring for this company!" said Mr. Alexiou.

Not knowing what to do with the silence, Mr. Alexiou adjusted the tone of his voice and kept going.

"Maria," said Mr. Alexiou turning his gaze towards the window, "another thing to consider is that the captain's responsibilities demand relentless focus. It's a full-time commitment, and frankly, some aspects require a level of... unpredictable hours that might conflict with establishing a strong work-life balance."

Maria was trying to detect the implications of the manager's words.

“The role you’re currently in is strategically positioned so that it allows for a bit more flexibility, that would be a better fit at this point of a young woman’s career.”

Maria was shocked. A whirlwind of emotions swept through her.

“Mr. Alexiou...?” said Maria. Tears were quickly forming in her eyes.

Maria looked at Mr. Alexiou and took a few steps back. She left speechless, the door wide open much like her emotional state, unsure of what’s next and afraid for her future.

Case Study Objectives

- Assessing the current state of gender equality in the Greek shipping industry, identify the key areas where gender inequality exists and highlight the advantages of gender equality.
- Demonstrate the benefits of advancing gender equality in terms of productivity and corporate reputation
- Understand the root causes of gender inequality
- Present strategies and best practices to achieve gender equality
- Inform companies and stakeholders about the potential impact of gender inequality and recommend solutions for improvement

These objectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing gender equality in the Greek shipping industry while directing exploration of the current challenges. They highlight the benefits of gender equality, and the actions needed to create an inclusive environment.

Case Study Questions

Some initial questions to be considered include:

- Discuss the key aspects of discrimination in the workplace that emerge in the case study.
- What are the implications for Maria if she decides to leave the company?
- What are the implications for Maria if she decides to stay with the company?
- How might the economic and social situations of Piraeus (Greece) and Aleppo (Syria) affect Maria’s decision?
- Discuss the ethical implications of the action(s) taken by Mr. Alexiou. What would be your response(s) to some of the comments that Mr. Alexiou made about Maria and the role of women in leadership positions?
- How would you define gender equality?
- Why is gender equality important? Students are invited to provide specific examples of how equality for women means progress for all (UN Sustainable Goal #5).
- How important are mentorship and training programs in fighting discrimination in the workplace?

Teaching Materials

All teaching materials can be found in the accompanying teaching notes document. If desired, please email Arete@smwc.edu.

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About the Authors



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Elisabetta Vitolini-Mroski is a certified executive coach with a background that includes 20 years in senior finance roles in the United States and abroad. Her work focuses on accelerating personal and professional change through leadership coaching in organizations across the globe. Living and working in Italy and the United States inspired Elisabetta's study of global leadership in which she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. Elisabetta is the founder of CoachAgility, an executive coaching firm.

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About the Authors (continued)



Aikaterini Sfyroera is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Industrial Design and Production Engineering at the University of West Attica. Her research interests include autonomous Shipping, supply Chain - Logistics and New Technologies in Shipping. Professionally, she has been involved since 2017 in administrative and financial support for MSc programs of the University of West Attica and participated in various Erasmus+ research projects as a researcher, like "JOINclusion" a project addressing the social exclusion of children with a migrant background and "Circuitex" about Circular Economy. She has also contributed to the ESPA "ENIRISST" project, focusing on intelligent infrastructure for shipping, supply chain, transport, and logistics.



Filippos Eleftherios Priniotakis holds a Bachelor of Science in Economics and Regional Development and a Master of Science in Public Economics and Policy. His research focuses on the intersection of environmental and economic sustainability and economic and political inequality. Throughout his academic career, he has been actively engaged in scientific research, contributing to projects such as the Erasmus+ funded Sustainable Energy Centres Of Vocational Excellence (SECOVE). In this role, he conducts research, participates in the organisation and teaching of students and staff, and fosters a supportive environment for young women pursuing STEM careers. His recent paper "Combating Climate Change: An Evaluation of Municipal Plans in Greece's most Densely Populated Regional Unit"

represents the first comprehensive assessment of its kind in Greece.

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