The Mermaids Are Out There So Why Aren't We?
Women and Sailing

by Marilyn Porter

L'auteure réfléchit sur son expérience de «femme capitaine» tout en analysant pourquoi si peu de femmes prennent la mer.

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When I first began to sail, I had no idea that it was a difficult or deviant thing to do. My mother taught me the fundamentals and then my brother and I stumbled about in a heavy-as-lead 13'4" standing-lug rigged dinghy, and gradually acquired some competence. We loved it, and the experience ensured that the sea and sailing have remained an important part of both our lives. My brother was five years younger than me, so there was no question about who was the skipper and who was the crew. In any event, at that point I was still bigger than he was. Later we graduated to slightly racier dinghies, and learnt to go faster and to capsize. At university, I sailed and raced both the dinghies and the half-decked boats belonging to the University Sailing Club. There were more men than women in the club, but then there were in the university as a whole.

Meanwhile, my brother frequently crewed aboard off-shore racing boats. Offshore sailing was a man's world, and most of us accepted it. We all know that some young women are as strong as some young men (although I certainly wasn't as strong as my brother), but that was hardly the point. Skippers wanted brute and obvious strength and competence (gained through experience) and they did not want the confusion of sex to further clutter their cramped and ultra-male crew quarters. Young women "need not apply" as "foredeck gorillas."

I did, in fact, get berths aboard off-shore racers, through my brother's introductions and as a navigator. Navigating was just about okay for a woman. It wasn't obviously "tough" and you stayed aft with the elderly and respectable skipper and other less virile crew members. That you had to go without sleep, do complicated sums over a rocking and wet table, not get sick, and take the blame if the boat was off course was, apparently, a feminine enough role.

Over the next couple of decades, I continued to sail, but in a fairly casual and occasional fashion. But when I arrived in Newfoundland, sailing seemed to be an obvious and attractive activity. Dinghies are not really an option in Newfoundland—not on the ocean, anyway—so after sailing with friends for a season or so, I bought a 30' boat. Suddenly, I had a new position. I was a "woman skipper"—a rare and threatening entity to the (male) Newfoundland sailing establishment.

Historically and today, naval, merchant, and fishing boats are overwhelmingly crewed by men. The literature, art, and ideology of the sea are rich in the archetypal male of Melville, Conrad, and Hemingway.[1] While the absolute prohibition on women at sea has lessened, it is still remarkable to find more than an exceptional woman aboard a long-distance boat. The closer one comes to shore, the more likely women are to appear on boats and actively fishing. Indeed, worldwide, the bulk of fishing that takes place within wading distance of the shore is carried out by women (Nadel-Klein and Davis). In Newfoundland, women have been as actively engaged in the fishery as men have, but mostly in the processing sector. When I was developing an analysis of women's role in Newfoundland fishing communities, and questioning why so few women went fishing, it became clear that while a traditional division of labour prevailed, it was also true that most women did not want to go out in fishing boats, and couldn't understand why I should be pressing them to do so. I was pressing them, not only because of my own love of the sea but because I was reluctant to accept that such an important part of our natural environment should be denied to them.

Women sailing, therefore, not only have to overcome the exclusion of women from sport (especially wilderness or "adventure" sports) but their exclusion from the whole maritime sphere. Yet, the mermaids are out there, so why aren't we?

There have been a few undaunted women down the ages—pirates like Grace O'Malley of Connemara, women like Hannah Snell, who served in the British Navy disguised as a man, or the sizeable band of women who sailed as the wives and daughters of the captains of blue water traders or whalers during the nineteenth century (de Pauw). But these were all exceptional women. Most women who sail today are also regarded as exceptional. How, then, can we turn sailing from an exceptional choice into a perfectly ordinary option for any woman who likes the outdoors?

The situation of women aboard offshore yachts is different according to whether they are crew or skipper, and whether they are racing or cruising. I will examine each of these in turn, but first we need to look at the

underlying economic and social barriers that prevent women sailing offshore boats. The first of these is money. It does not necessarily cost a lot of money to buy or maintain a boat, but fewer women than men have any kind of disposable income. Even if a woman does have money she will be hampered by the conditioning that does not allow women to spend money, especially "family" money on "leisure activities." So, if a (heterosexual) couple reaches the point when they feel they can spend hard earned dollars on a holiday, or an RV, or a boat or some such, the decision-maker is often the male. Most cruising boats are, therefore, chosen and bought at the instigation of the man, even if the woman is then obliged to spend time and effort on this "joint" possession. I know many women who either have sailed when they were younger or would dearly love to, but unlike men, don't feel that they can force this choice on their families.

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On the other hand, it costs virtually nothing to crew on offshore boats. Crews provide the labour and the skipper provides the boat. This option is still far more difficult for women to exercise, especially on cruising boats. Heterosexual couples remain more suspicious of the (potential) sexual ambitions of single women than they are of single men and all-male crews reject the invasion of their all-male space. Collective or shared ownership would be one way in which women could overcome some of these problems. If we build on women's relatively greater success at making collective endeavors work, we could look forward to a time when a woman could buy into a boat-owning collective for the same amount that it would cost to pursue any other outdoor sport.

The second key to the exclusion of women from sailing lies in the tricky but self-reinforcing relationship between biology, technology, and ideology. Sometimes I lie awake dreaming of the ideal feminist boat. This would have large winches and lots of them (to overcome our relative lack of upper body strength and do the gorillas out of a job). It would save space by having a loo with no standing headroom. It would then be impossible to take men aboard because much as we would like to we would not have suitable toilet arrangements for them! This is a frivolous example, but much of women's exclusion from sailing has been based on less, or on the fact that the technology has been organized round the typical male physique. Owning my own boat has meant that I can make certain choices and use technology to overcome my limitations. It is perfectly possible to lead the lines in such a way as to allow relatively inflexible or weak people to handle them. And, my boat is the only one I know of that has a locker dedicated to keeping purses dry.

A third underlying reason for the exclusion of women is time, or rather lack of it. Sailing, like many other outdoor pursuits, requires substantial investments of time. Offshore races, and especially cruises, can take days or weeks. Even an afternoon spin will involve several hours on the water. Then there are the preparations, the clearing up, and the travel time to and from the dock. While this is no worse than for skiing or canoeing, it does make it very hard for women with domestic responsibilities, or women already balancing work and home responsibilities, to join in. To make the situation worse, offshore sailing tends to be unpredictable, involving delayed returns or late starts. Above all, boats are complicated items and the maintenance and routine tasks also require a considerable amount of time.

When I bought my first boat in Newfoundland, it was because of a happy and unusual set of circumstances. I was a single parent, but I had a good and secure job at Memorial University. I had solved most of my financial problems, so I had some spare cash. My first boat was cheap and simple. I had no husband or male partner who would either take over the boat or guilt me into not buying it. I had a young teenage son (and all his friends), who had growing amounts of strength and lots of unharnessed energy. I was also a feminist, and saw no reason why I shouldn't have my own boat. When I became the second woman in Newfoundland to own and skipper her own sailboat, I rapidly came up against whole areas in which my gender based education and training were wholly inadequate. The sailing part was relatively simple. It was maintaining and repairing the plethora of systems that go to make up a cruising boat that exposed my real weaknesses. With no yacht repair facility on the island, sailors have to develop the necessary skills themselves—or rely on their friends. As my entire tool collection fitted comfortably into a plastic bag, I was not equipped to turn overnight into a plumber, electrician, diesel mechanic, rigger, joiner, and welder. Nor are most women. Nor, I discovered, are most men—but they do cover up their inexperience better and they do tend to have some kind of informal knowledge that allows them to take a stab at most jobs.

To help me overcome my biggest bogey—the engine—I gathered some other women sailors and persuaded a male instructor to give us a basic introduction to diesel engines. These were not feminists, but they were all competent women, "wife-crews" from whom the traditional division of labour had hidden the workings of the engines on their boats. The first evening, he began by explaining the general principles of diesel engines. You could have heard a pin drop. Finally one woman put her pen down, and said in tones of repressed frustration and amazement "Why did no one ever tell us that it was that simple." These words could be emblazoned over the door to many things

women have been excluded from on grounds of incompetence or incapacity!

Let us turn to some of the specific barriers women face. Racing crews are bigger than cruising crews. Often the same boat that appears to need six hefty young men to race will cruise with a couple of people—usually a heterosexual couple. As when my brother began, it is easy for a man to get a place as crew aboard a racing yacht. It is much harder for a woman to get a place, even a young one, unless she already knows or is related to the skipper. Women don't look as strong and it is harder for them to accumulate the experience that would overcome lack of brute strength. The answer, of course, is women's racing.

In my yacht club, this started in a very tentative way, a few years ago. It used to be a timid little event hung about with regulations that recognized the male ownership of the boats and emphasised its "difference" from "real" racing. These included the prohibition of the use of spinnakers (those multi-coloured, balloon shaped sails) and insistence on each boat having a man aboard. Since then, women's racing has grown in confidence and size until now it has a full schedule of races and regattas, a fleet as large as the "men's", and just as active, and a substantial group of experienced women sailors, both as skippers and as crew. Indeed, this year we sent a crew to a women's world keelboat championship in France. In general, more and more regattas have women's sections, and these are no longer confined to the smaller boats. But it is still unusual to find women aboard boats in the highest echelons, such as the Whitbread or America's cup. If anything, it is slightly more common to find entire women's crews (who sometimes find it easier to get sponsorship because they are so unusual). Recent examples include the all women crew of "Maiden" in the last Whitbread Race and Kohl's all women team in the last America's cup. Isabelle Autissier, the only woman in the recent BOC (British Oxygen Challenge) Round the World solo race led both in her class and overall until she was dismasted in the Southern Ocean. But by and large, and certainly in our club, men still own the boats, and this places formidable barriers in the way of women progressing to any form of true equality in racing.

It is a curious irony that cruising, the non-sporty end of sailing, should actually be more difficult for women to enter. There is, of course, a "natural" and traditional role for women to play in cruising—that of wife, mother, cook, nurse, etc. In the past, few women who have gone offshore in either recreational or commercial craft, have escaped this role. Some have even gloried in it, as the women aboard the Nantucket whaling ships did, bringing "civilization" and religion to the rough, conscript crews. Even today, most of the positions advertised in the press for crew for oceanic crossings or charter ventures will call specifically for women as cooks, or for a (heterosexual) couple who will fall into the traditional division of labour. Closer to home, the vast bulk of cruising crews are made up of either families, (heterosexual) couples with or without children, or small groups of single-sex (overwhelmingly male) friends. It is very difficult for women without a boat to break into either of these categories, and when boats need extra crew for delivery to a distant port, they are much more likely to call on qualified men than on the (few) qualified women.

So, there are a lot of women on cruising boats, but they are "wife-crews," in fact. I have already indicated that in most cases it is the man who initiates the decision to buy a boat. In the happiest cases, his wife or partner, will be just as keen, will enjoy the experience, and will become just as skilled. But, at best, it is likely that the division of labour between them will leave her in a relatively subordinate position with regard to decisions and to the management of the boat, and totally ignorant of many of the most important functions. The engine is a common example of this. So is docking. This is traditionally the skipper's job, and with reason when the skipper is also the owner as a mistake can lead to expensive damage. But, it is also more fun than handling the dock lines, and when the boat is owned jointly, it doesn't make sense for only one of the owners to take the risk. In any event, the outcome is that many "wife-crews" can't dock their own boats.

The least happy, but all-too-common, outcome is a boat crewed by a macho and domineering husband and an intimidated, reluctant, and fearful wife. In this case, the woman may well resist learning anything about sailing and confine her energies into turning the interior into a close equivalent of a safe shore-side cabin. Many of these women have been transformed by going on sailing courses, which are directed to their needs and which are often run by women. Here, at last, they can do things without being shouted at, can take their time, can ask questions, and generally discover that sailing can be fun.[2] As the women who run these courses are often feminists, the outcome can be doubly progressive.

There are more women sailing more kinds of boats today, in a wider variety of roles. There are more supports for women who want to sail, and there is increasing tolerance of women sailors at the local level. But it is still difficult for women to either take up or succeed in sailing. Feminists should not treat sailing as if it was some marginal, rich man's sport. Rather, I think we should see it as an important and enormously enriching activity from which we have been excluded for far too long.

Marilyn Porter was born and brought up in North Wales and went to university in Dublin—both good sailing areas. She moved to St. Johns, Newfoundland in 1980, where she teaches Sociology and Women's Studies. She owns and sails a CS33 called Burgundy.

[1]For discussions of different aspects of the male dominance of the maritime, see J.M. Acheson, "The Anthropology of Fishing," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 10 (1981): 275-316.

[2]Women's sailing schools or sailing courses directed at women advertise in *Cruising World* (Newport, RI) and

other cruising magazines. There is also a Newsletter for women sailors, *The Nautical Woman* (Harve de Grace, MD).

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REBEKKAH ALEXANDER

Mirror Mirror

In my sister's bedroom
I stood in front of her full length mirror.
Until she left for university
I entered only with sacred permission
but she stopped coming home
after Thanksgiving that year
and I boldly stood on the woven rug
in front of my reflection.

I remember I stood there crying,
grade eight awkward body
with ill-fitting clothes and hair which hung
like overcooked spaghetti,
feeling larger than the fattest person in the world
wondering why, why
was I born so twisted and hideous,
so unlike the other girls
who passed secret notes in class
and went to the dances afterschool.

I hated them.

I hated the boys who looked at me
with eyes that told me I was invisible
and snapped my bra strap
and called me Tank as they pushed me down in the playground.

I hated that no one ever saw—
beyond the dirtyness and raggedness,
the cumbersome walk
and the silent eyes which never raised.

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