

## Life at sea in the spotlight

By Anna Massapi

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SHIPPING Industry representatives have met in Limassol to discuss the challenges faced by people who choose to pursue a life at sea. The meeting explored issues such as the opportunities afforded to seafarers to participate in public affairs – even through exercising their right to vote – gender and racial equality, as well as job security and incentives.

The meeting, jointly organised by the EU's Europe for Citizens Programme 2007-13 and the Panhellenic Union of Commercial Shipping Captains (PEPEN), took place on Monday at a Limassol hotel. The project aims to explore the contribution of seafarers to European action on equality, as well as implement action on bringing more equality to the shipping sector.

"No sailor will let his child follow this profession. It is just too difficult. Most people who take up this profession eventually abandon it for a job on dry land. It is a matter of incentives and working conditions," said Captain Theodoros Demetriou.

The meeting's participants discussed ways of attracting more young people to the profession by tackling problems such as job security, social security provision and better wages. A burning issue, at present, is the social security provision for European seafarers. The issue is due to be discussed at EU level. However, Europe's seafarers do not even have an organised trade union to represent their cause.

A life at sea may be difficult for a man, but it seems to be almost impossible to lead for a woman. Participants' comments at Monday's meeting revealed the reluctance on the part of the sector to accept women seafarers as equal. There are many difficulties for women seafarers. In short, this is not a profession for women. The two sexes may have equal worth, but they are not equal in everything. Women do not have the same physical strength as men do," said Captain Demetriou.

"The problem with women has nothing to do with body, or strength, or ability. Women who work in ships usually perform better than men. The problem is that when I invest in a cadet, I want to invest long-term. However, once women have babies, they stop working at sea," said Captain Ioannis Rizeakos of PEPEN.

Monday's meeting at Limassol was the second for the group, set up to implement an EU Project, 'Seafarers in Europe-Action Towards Equality'. Following the completion of a series of focus-groups to discuss issues, a guide book will be drafted, to present project findings.

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