

The “Lone Female” Phenomenon

By AXIS member Katy Crawford

The “lone female” or “single female” phenomenon is one that is not exclusive to the offshore industry; it’s been around for years in pop culture, always featuring heavily in Romance Films/TV shows and books. The figure is always portrayed as a lonely and sad, almost always pitied character; which coincidentally is how you end up feeling when you’re told that you can’t go offshore or have to de-mob early because you’re a woman and the platform needs the bed space!

“Lone female” within the O&G offshore industry is loosely defined as a female in single cabin occupancy on a North Sea asset. Most North Sea assets operating today have 2 beds per cabin (or 2 + 1 meaning 3 beds total), and the majority of (if not all) companies have a rule whereby men and women on the same shift cannot share a cabin. This is not an HSE or legal requirement but is built into many company policies to “reduce risk” and also a comfort element.

Thus, if you are required to go offshore for your role, and you happen to be a woman, and there isn’t another woman onboard to share with, you’re taking up 2 bedspaces.

Although not an issue on every platform, for those who are at full capacity, it is a prominent consideration. And it can very quickly become a problem when choosing which jobs/projects go ahead, and by proxy, which people make it to offshore.

To address this predicament, there are a few options that companies typically employ:

- Lone women don’t go offshore and are bumped or deferred to a later date
- Women and men do share but on split shifts, i.e. day and night shift
- Accept that one bed will be “lost”
- Bunk lone women visitors in with female leadership occupying solo cabins

However, even this isn’t straight forward. Women on regular crews can end up with multiple new cabin mates within their normal trip, adjusting to sharing with a new person may not be difficult for everyone but it still takes some adjustment to adapt to living with a new mate for a few days. For early career women, we frequently hear stories of cancelled trips: this has the potential over time to add up to less valuable offshore experience gained, putting women behind their male counterparts. And for women in leadership, who get called more than their male colleagues to share their solo cabins with visitors, returning from a busy day to find new guests isn’t always welcome. (Though the feeling may be mutual, sharing with the boss who’s used to her own space isn’t necessarily a comfortable place to be.)

I’ve personally had one trip where I had to move cabins 5 times over a 2-week period to accommodate oncoming personnel and make sure I had a single cabin. Aside from the inconvenience of being called up during shift to pack up my belongings and move rooms multiple times, I was reminded that I was the at the root of a logistical nightmare for the Heli admin organising the beds, who told me more than once it was making her life difficult that I was a woman.

The proportion of women to men working offshore is currently around 3% (Ref. 1). With fixed infrastructure embedded it's reasonable to expect there is very low capital expenditure available to undertake accommodation upgrades. The Inclusive Offshore Working group recommends the below as immediate steps which can be actioned:

- Banish the stigma around the phrase "lone woman" – the phrase is often used as an acceptable excuse that people don't dig deeper to resolve
- Designate dedicated women cabins (which can be used by others when not in use). This eases planning for Heli admin
- Work with the supply chain and "buddy up" single gender staff so they are mobilising together to allow maximum room occupancy
- Encourage early career professionals to go offshore for more regular visits; this is our largest pool of women talent within engineering; and this will help them develop in their careers, reducing and eventually eliminating the lone woman concept
- Push back on "bumping" as a default position

If you implement any of the changes above, or have found other ways to create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for offshore workers, then - as always - we'd love to hear from you.

References

[Workforce Insight 2020, OGUK](#)